



A Lyon's Pride

The Lyon's Den Connected World

Emily Royal



Copyright © 2021 Emily Royal
Text by Emily Royal

Dragonblade Publishing, Inc. is an imprint of Kathryn Le Veque Novels, Inc.
P.O. Box 7968
La Verne CA 91750
ceo@dragonbladepublishing.com

Produced in the United States of America

First Edition June 2021
Kindle Edition

Reproduction of any kind except where it pertains to short quotes in relation to advertising or promotion is strictly prohibited.

All Rights Reserved.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

License Notes:

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook, once purchased, may not be re-sold. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it or borrow it, or it was not purchased for you and given as a gift for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. If this book was purchased on an unauthorized platform, then it is a pirated and/or unauthorized copy and violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Do not purchase or accept pirated copies. Thank you for respecting the author's hard work. For subsidiary rights, contact Dragonblade Publishing, Inc.



ARE YOU SIGNED UP FOR DRAGONBLADE'S BLOG?

You'll get the latest news and information on exclusive giveaways, exclusive excerpts, coming releases, sales, free books, cover reveals and more.

Check out our complete list of authors, too!

No spam, no junk. That's a promise!

[**Sign Up Here**](#)



Dearest Reader;

Thank you for your support of a small press. At Dragonblade Publishing, we strive to bring you the highest quality Historical Romance from the some of the best authors in the business. Without your support, there is no 'us', so we sincerely hope you adore these stories and find some new favorite authors along the way.

Happy Reading!

CEO, Dragonblade Publishing

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Emily Royal

Headstrong Harts

What the Hart Wants, Book 1

Queen of my Hart, Book 2

Hidden Hart, Book 3

London Libertines

Henry's Bride, Book 1

Hawthorne's Wife, Book 2

Roderick's Widow, Book 3

The Lyon's Den Connected World

A Lyon's Pride

Other Lyon's Den Books

Into the Lyon's Den by Jade Lee

The Scandalous Lyon by Maggi Andersen

Fed to the Lyon by Mary Lancaster

The Lyon's Lady Love by Alexa Aston

The Lyon's Laird by Hildie McQueen

The Lyon Sleeps Tonight by Elizabeth Ellen Carter

A Lyon in Her Bed by Amanda Mariel

Fall of the Lyon by Chasity Bowlin

Lyon's Prey by Anna St. Claire

Loved by the Lyon by Collette Cameron

The Lyon's Den in Winter by Whitney Blake

Kiss of the Lyon by Meara Platt

Always the Lyon Tamer by Emily E K Murdoch

To Tame the Lyon by Sky Purington

How to Steal a Lyon's Fortune by Alanna Lucas

The Lyon's Surprise by Meara Platt

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Publisher's Note

Additional Dragonblade books by Author Emily Royal

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Epilogue

About the Author



Chapter One

London, March 1816

"I'm not here to find love, Mrs. Lyon. I'm here to find a husband."

The woman opposite Lily shifted in her seat, a smile curling on her lips.

"Are they not one and the same thing?"

"In my experience," Lily said, "the two are mutually exclusive."

"Mutually exclusive?"

"In statistics, it means two events for which a simultaneous occurrence is a mathematical impossibility."

The smile deepened. "Your mama always said you were too bright for your own good, Mrs. Diamond."

"I think we both know that's not my real name," Lily said.

"Nevertheless, it's the name I shall use, even when we're alone," came the reply. "Discretion is valued here at the Lyon's Den. As is intelligence in a woman, of course. I take it my terms are acceptable?"

"They are," Lily said, "if a little steep. It remains to be seen whether the quality of the goods will match the enormity of the fee."

"Which is something your mother's patrons often pondered."

Heat bloomed in Lily's cheeks at the woman's casual reference to Mama's past. Mama had utilized her only assets to further Lily's education and give her a better life—but Lily was not so naïve as to be unaware of the stigma attached to such a profession, even though that profession had served the rich and titled for thousands of years.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Diamond. I meant no disrespect. Dear Francesca and I have known each other for years. There's a beautiful symmetry in my being able to help her daughter as a mark of our friendship."

"A friendship which does not run to a discount on your fee," Lily

said.

"You're a woman of business, Mrs. Diamond. You understand better than most that the mark of a successful transaction is where each party exchanges something of which they have a plentiful supply, for something on which they place much value."

Lily couldn't help but smile. Mama's mysterious friend lived up to her expectations. She spoke in riddles, and was shrouded—both literally, and figuratively—in mystery.

And, most important of all, she was going to broker a deal in which Lily could purchase a titled husband without the need for adhering to the niceties of society.

It was about time that men were the commodities for a change. Lily was no longer the naïve child of a decade ago who believed in the power of love. No—power resided in wealth and a title. The former—as Lily had demonstrated—could be achieved through hard work. The latter must be purchased.

"I take it my terms are acceptable," Lily said.

"Eminently," came the reply. "The marriage contract places few obligations on the other party. No reasonable man could object to them."

"I have yet to experience a *reasonable* man."

The corner of Mrs. Lyon's lip curled upward beneath her veil.

"You possess sufficient understanding such that you will have no unreasonable expectations."

"Then we have a deal," Lily said. "When can I expect delivery?"

"You must come and collect, Mrs. Diamond. I would not have it said that you were unable to inspect the goods. A woman should always be in attendance when she purchases a husband. You wouldn't want me to furnish you with a fright, would you?"

"A handsome visage doesn't go hand in hand with a good character, Mrs. Lyon," Lily said. "I've surpassed the age where women believe such things are necessary to their happiness, and I have no wish to be shackled to a young buck eager to exhibit his virility. If you can find an older gentleman willing to give my family the status his title affords, in exchange for cash, but with no desire to—pester me in the bedroom—then I'll consider it a job well done."

Mrs. Lyon smiled. "There are plenty of titled men desperate for cash," she said. "I should find you a suitable candidate in the next few days. Now, if you'd be so good as to wait here, I'll send someone to show you out."

Ten minutes later, Lily found herself stepping out into the cold air on Cleveland Row. She turned and glanced at the building, the pale blue frontage which gave it a benign air, hiding the multitude of sins which took place within.

Was it really that easy? To part with a sum—a fortune, admittedly—of cash in exchange for a husband and all the benefits his name would give her girls? To bind herself to another in a contract which was driven by pure business need, with no room for matters of the heart?

Yes, it was. She was no longer the child who'd fallen in love only to have her heart broken. No longer the young girl who'd experienced disgrace, humiliation, and vilification in a world which valued women as mere commodities in which to trade—a world where women without money or reputations were disposable trinkets to be used once, then tossed aside once their worth had gone.

This time, she'd seek a husband on her own terms. She would pay for him, take what she wanted, and to hell with any notion of obedience or love.

After all, wasn't that what men had been doing for centuries?

In another time, she might have frowned on her resolve—the heart which had been hardened into stone.

Mrs. Diamond was an apt pseudonym. Diamonds were forged from intense pressure—crushed by an immeasurable force, shrinking almost into nothing. Until finally, they resisted and fought back, emerging bright, hard, and unyielding.

The world in which she resided required her to be hard—more so, because of her sex. The men she dealt with—the few who knew that the proprietor of her business was, in fact, a woman—viewed her as harsh, unyielding, and with little affection. She could only imagine what they said to their wives when they returned to them after doing business with her. What might they say when they learned that she was to marry? What might they say of the man she chose?

Poor bastard—she'll chew his balls off within a week of reciting the vows.

Let them! Let them all think her a cruel medusa who turned men to stone if she so much as looked at them. She did it to protect her heart, and to protect the few people she loved in the world.

It was not her fault that she'd been refashioned into a cruel nemesis.

It was *his*.



Chapter Two

“What the devil’s kind of place have you brought me to, Hart?”

Mason glanced up at the building before him. A discreet-enough-looking establishment, but in his experience, a benign appearance was often a sign that all number of sins took place behind its doors.

His companion chuckled. “This, my friend, is where you can restore your fortune. It’s the finest gaming den in London, and the best-kept secret among society.”

“A gaming den?” Mason eyed his friend. “Not the place a respectable banker should be encouraging his clients to attend—especially when this particular client has little cash to spare.”

“There are three ways by which a man can obtain funds,” Hart said.

“Which are?”

“The first—he can earn it.” Hart cocked an eyebrow at Mason, and his lip curled into a half-smile, half-sneer. “Given your father’s spectacular losses in recent years, I think we can say that particular skill does not run in your family.”

Bloody hell—had he returned from ten years of shooting the French to be insulted?

But deep down, Mason knew that Hart was right. He had no head for business, which was why he’d enlisted in the first place—a career spent shouting at subordinates and shooting at enemies was more suited to his level of intellect.

“The second, he can win it,” Hart continued.

Mason shook his head. “That requires blind luck, of which I have very little.”

Hart snorted. “Son of an earl—now an earl in your own right—born into one of the oldest families, with all the privileges and respect by means of your name? I’d say you were born with a great deal of luck.

But it's a myth that winning at the gaming tables is dependent on luck."

"Aren't games a matter of chance?"

"Probability, yes," Hart said. "But probability is not the same as luck. A man capable of determining the probability of certain events will adjust his stake accordingly to maximize his chances of winning. If he plays against a man who relies on pure luck, he has the upper hand. Which is why I rarely play any game other than piquet, or occasionally vingt-et-un."

"In which case, my chances are limited," Mason said.

"Which is why the third option is, in my view, likely to be the best in your case," Hart said. "And..." he added, eyeing up the building, "in this establishment, it's likely to be the most lucrative."

"And what is it?"

"Marriage, of course," Hart said. "To put it baldly, a rich wife is what you need. The proprietor of this particular establishment is renowned for effecting the most unusual matches which can be specified in terms to suit all parties."

"Unusual? How so?"

"Women come here to seek a husband and are prepared to pay a fortune in order to do so." Hart lowered his voice. "Women of doubtful reputation and background who are otherwise frowned upon by society. What better match for a man such as yourself, who has declared every day since returning from the militia that he has no wish to set foot in another society party? If you want a wife, there's no better place to find one with so little effort at courtship."

Mason shook his head. "I know all too well the cost associated with a coerced marriage arranged by others."

"Ah, but this time you'd have a say in your fate, rather than be bullied into it by your father..." Hart hesitated, "...may God rest his soul."

Mason rolled his eyes. Why was it that the old bastard demanded respect and reverence now he was in his grave? By his very death, he'd cast a light on his dire financial circumstances, forcing Mason to return to England to face up to the very real fact that his estate and title was in danger of being handed over to some obnoxious cousin who would, most likely, turn Mason's stepmother onto the street.

Which was precisely what Father had done to *her*—tossed her out with no thought for whether she or her mother would live or die.

The one woman he'd loved in the whole world. His precious flower.

He could do nothing for her anymore—she was long gone. After he'd

given up searching for her, he'd spent the past decade grieving.

But he could do something for poor Wilhelmina, the woman worn out physically by Father's continued desperation for another son, who was a broken ghost of the beautiful debutante that Mason himself had abandoned. He'd never loved Wilhelmina, but if he were unable to restore life to the woman he'd loved and lost, at least he could prevent Wilhelmina from following her to her grave.

If he had to marry some harriidan with more money than respectability, then why shouldn't he? The pride of his family line had caused nothing but misery and death. Father would spin in his grave at the thought of him marrying a woman of doubtful reputation—and it would serve him right.

Mason could even live with himself, as long as his flower—his gentle Lily—would forgive him from beyond the grave.

"Very well," Mason said. "One night won't do any harm."

"Good." Hart led the way to the entrance. "You'll find the very best of everything within these walls," he said. "The best food—their fillet mignon melts in the mouth—and the best wine. And, of course, the best doxies to entertain you. Have you heard of La Flamme? She spent many a night here offering services that were hailed as being *the epitome of discreet, exotic pleasures for the discerning gentleman*. Your father was besotted with her—I dare say he spent half his fortune here. La Flamme had particular skills her clientele was prepared to pay a king's ransom for, and she sent many a besotted man into bankruptcy."

"Is she here tonight?" Mason asked. "I should like to wring her neck."

"Good Lord, no! She retired to Italy, if I recall. She told her patrons that she intended to spend her retirement dancing in the Trevi fountain at sunrise—or some such. She's not been seen for five years. A great loss to mankind."

"Did you indulge in her services?" Mason asked.

Hart shook his head. "Far too expensive—and far too grasping."

Mason looked at his friend. With his piratical good looks and arresting blue eyes, Dexter Hart had no need of cash to persuade women to part their thighs. In all likelihood, they'd pay him to bed them.

"There's plenty of doxies in the Den who'd be willing to service you," Hart continued, "even at your age. Mrs. Dove-Lyon caters to all tastes."

Mason snorted. "I think you'll find that men are like a fine wine and improve with age. A woman may prefer the pleasures that a man of forty can give her, compared to a greenhorn in his twenties."

"Careful," Hart said, "I detect a little frisson of temper—not good for a man of your age—you wouldn't want any more gray hairs, would you? And besides—you should think of your heart."

Mason followed his companion into the interior of the building through a door that led into a vast room. He'd never seen a gaming hall like it. It was a hive of activity. Tables filled the room; men dressed in finery waved cash at dealers—masked men who moved with the fluidity of the practiced card-sharp. Above the hubbub of muted voices, music filtered through the room, the soft melody of a harp, which gave the room an ethereal atmosphere, as if he were in the company of angels.

Servants glided across the room, brandishing trays filled with glasses. As Mason moved into the center of the room, one approached him and held out the tray.

Hart picked up a glass. "Take one," he said. "Tonight, I'll stand your drinks."

"Really?"

"Pay me back when you've restored your fortune."

"And if I don't?"

Hart shrugged. "Then I'll consider it a lost venture." He grinned. "Much like your father's shipping enterprise."

Mason sighed. Even he understood the dangers of running a shipping venture without insurance. But Father, the old miser, had cut too many corners and bypassed the essential expenses. The Almighty must have had a bloody good laugh when he sent Father's ships down in a storm in the Atlantic.

He took a glass, drained the contents, then reached for another. "Given that the risk is all yours, Hart, I'll indulge this time."

"Ah! Hart!" a voice cried. "I thought it was you! Care to partake] in the latest game?"

"Dawkins, you old devil!" Hart said. He gestured toward Mason. "You know Colonel Sandford, of course—or I should say, Lord Redstone."

Mason bowed toward the newcomer, a smartly attired man in his thirties.

"William Dawkins—Marquess of Easton," Hart said.

The marquess issued a bow, then gestured toward the gaming table. "You simply *must* take part in the latest game," he said, his slurred words indicating that he'd already drunk a little too much of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's brandy. "It's Axford's idea—a test of stamina, daring, and a man's ability to hold his liquor. We need someone to make up the numbers."

"What sort of game?" Hart asked.

Dawkins puffed out his chest. "A Lordy Race!"

"What the devil's a Lordy Race?" Mason asked.

"It's a race around the gaming room," Dawkins said. "We'll be clearing the perimeter for the competitors later tonight."

"It doesn't sound much to be excited about," Hart said. "I think I'll pass."

"Ah—but a Lordy Race is different."

"So named because it involves a bunch of lords making fools of themselves?" Hart snorted. "I'll take my chances at vingt-et-un, where I can make a fortune without breaking a sweat."

Dawkins rolled his eyes. "It's got nothing to do with lords, Hart," he said, "or *your* sort wouldn't be permitted to take part. It's so named because when the whistle blows, each man must drink a glass of laudanum mixed with brandy. The winner is the man who can run the furthest without collapsing."

"What a damned ridiculous way to spend an evening," Mason said.

"But you must admit it's more diverting than piquet," Dawkins replied. "And think of the stakes! A thousand guineas for the winner."

"And a bloody sore head for the loser," Mason said.

"The loser stands to gain more than a sore head," Dawkins said. "He'll find himself betrothed to our proprietor's latest client."

"Marriage to a stranger?" Mason asked. "No, thank you very much."

"Think of it," Dawkins continued. "A fat dowry and a pair of equally fat thighs to part at your command. Mrs. Lyon attracts the wealthiest in female flesh, if not the most respectable."

Female flesh? Could the young pup be more sordid in his expression?

Dawkins gestured upward. Overlooking the gaming room was a gallery occupied by a number of female forms. One stood apart from the rest, a shadowy, veiled figure, dressed in black, hands on the gallery rail, standing proud, as if surveying her kingdom.

"Mrs. Dove-Lyon," Hart whispered. "The Black Widow of Whitehall."

"Ye gods," Mason said. "She sounds like a spider spinning a web."

"In some ways she is," Dawkins replied, "but the flies enter the web knowing full well what they're letting themselves in for."

"And men are her flies?"

"Rich women come to her to find suitable husbands," Dawkins said. "Women who, for various reasons, would not have any success on the marriage mart. It's the perfect place to restore one's wealth, with none of the drawbacks of having to pander to some doting mama, or to waste

any time undergoing the delicate rituals of courtship.”

“Surely most women prefer to be courted?”

Dawkins gave a laugh of derision. “Some women prefer to get down to business.” He raised his glass. “So—can I count you both in? We need at least twelve. The stake is ten guineas, and you stand to win a thousand.”

“Not me,” Hart said. “I’m looking for a titled wife—and here, it’s the *women*, not the men, who purchase titles. But Redstone, here, would be delighted, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know...” Mason hesitated.

“But I do,” Hart responded. “I’ll cover your stake.”

“Very good!” Dawkins cried. “Be ready at ten o’clock.”

Before Mason could respond, Dawkins disappeared into the crowd.

“Poor bugger,” Hart said. “He’s yet to find himself a wife despite his best efforts, and his desperation increases each time he comes here.”

“Surely the son of a duke could find a wife if he clicked his fingers in the nearest ballroom,” Mason said.

“Ah, but he prefers to indulge in games,” Hart replied. “And the women who come here possess greater wealth than the prim little misses of society. Wealth obtained through means which are, perhaps, a little to the left of what might be considered legitimate will always be greater. Earning money is twice as hard when it’s honest.”

“Is that why *you’re* so wealthy, Hart?” Mason asked.

“No. It’s because I work twice as much.”

Mason could well believe it. The determined set to Hart’s chin spoke of a driven man—a man who’d risen from poverty and was on the brink of becoming the wealthiest banker in London, even if most of society ignored him.

“Young Dawkins, I suspect, has not succeeded in winning a wife here because the Black Widow does not yet wish him to,” Hart continued.

“Are you saying that the odds are stacked against him?”

“Precisely,” Hart said. “The first rule of any gaming house is that the house always wins. And where it comes to making a match, I suspect Mrs. Lyon plays her hand to ensure the matches are in her clients’ favor—the clients with the cash, that is.”

“Dawkins seems a pleasant enough fellow—and he’ll inherit a dukedom.”

“But you must admit he’s not the brightest candle in the set,” Hart said. “And what he lacks in intelligence, he makes up for in profligacy and indulgence. I hear the old duke despairs of the continuation of the

Bowborough estate, to the point where he's applied to the trustees to restrict the family's access to the coffers to prevent his son from wasting away the entire fortune. As a result, he's likely to be making a good deal more visits here while he continues his quest for a rich wife."

"Why not parade himself round the Marriage Mart instead?" Mason asked.

Hart shrugged his shoulders. "Where would be the fun in that?"

"So, if I *were* to join in this ridiculous race tonight..." Mason said.

"...you stand to win a thousand guineas," Hart said. "A man of your experience, capable of holding his liquor, is likely to run far further than a drunkard such as Dawkins before collapsing. Doubtless, ten years traipsing across battlefields and living in barracks has given you the constitution of an ox."

"That may be, but I can still appreciate a good fillet mignon."

"Then I'll stand you supper, provided you agree to join the race."

"Oh, very well," Mason sighed. "I'm in."

"You'll need to sign the contract if you are to take part. And if you win, you must promise to give me half your winnings."

"Ah—you wish me to earn *you* five hundred guineas?"

"And five hundred for yourself, of course."

"It doesn't add up," Mason said. "Twelve men paying ten guineas a piece comes to a hundred and twenty, yet the winner will take home a thousand."

"The Black Widow makes up the rest," Hart continued. "She—or I should say, her client—sponsors the game."

"So if I win..."

"If you win, you'll further your reputation for a stomach of iron and swell your coffers."

"And if I come last?"

"Then you'll gain a rich wife."

Hadn't Mason determined to find himself a rich wife? Any woman who entered into an arrangement with Mrs. Dove-Lyon was unlikely to be some simpering miss wanting love. A cold, calculating woman after a title and prepared to pay for it was just what he needed.

Not that he'd find himself married after tonight. Dawkins was so drunk he could barely stand. Most likely, Dawkins would find himself shackled for life to one of the creatures who stood on the gallery watching them from above.



Chapter Three

Lily placed her hands on the gallery rail and surveyed the gaming den below. A cacophony of noise circulated around the room—the clatter of chips thrown on the tables, the chatter and laughter of the gamesters, accompanied by the clear instructions of the table hosts. And in the background, the soft sound of music, a gentle harp melody, the angelic notes belied the iniquity taking place in the room.

How many of them had purchased Mama's services in the past? Men who thought little of tossing a woman on the street but were happy to toss her a coin for their own gratification. Was there really a suitable husband to be found among them?

It was as if she were standing at the brink of a cage full of beasts.

But these particular beasts were no worse than the men who prowled society's ballrooms. At least here, there was no pretense. A man's lust for money was not concealed beneath a delicate invitation to dance. Neither, of course, was a woman's need for a husband. But a match founded on pure need carried no risk of a broken heart. And Lily had learned, in the past decade, that contracts conducted with business-like efficiency were better than mere promises, no matter how beautifully those promises were voiced.

"Are you ready, Mrs. Diamond?" Lily's companion asked.

Lily turned to the veiled figure beside her and nodded. Footsteps approached, and a young woman appeared, brandishing a piece of paper which she handed to Lily's companion.

"Ah—tonight's combatants. Thank you, Hermia. If you would wait while we make our selection."

Mrs. Lyon read the paper, and Lily could detect the ghost of a smile on her lips, which curved gently upward beneath her veil.

"We have twelve competitors tonight," she said. "An heir to a

dukedom..." she shook her head. "No, he's a wastrel who'll drink himself into an early grave before you've had time to capitalize on his title. A viscount with two mistresses who frequents bawdy houses. Hmm—he's unlikely to leave you alone in the bedchamber, and I'd be surprised if he didn't have some form of the pox given his sexual habits..." she ran her finger down the piece of paper... "Oh dear, not *him* again."

"Who?" Lily asked.

"A duke in his twenties. His papa died fifteen years ago. He's something of a mama's boy who is known to cry after he climaxes. He wants a wet-nurse, not a wife. I wouldn't recommend him at all." She continued scanning. "Ah—A newcomer. A little older than the others. Titled and recently returned from the army. According to Lysander's note, he's a respectable man—something of a hero—who fought at Waterloo. He's recently returned to claim his title after his father's passing. Perhaps he'll do for you."

"What's his name?" Lily asked. Mrs. Lyon folded the piece of paper and smiled. "I'm known for my discretion, Mrs. Diamond," she said. "You agreed to my terms, did you not? I wouldn't match you with a man who does not meet your requirements." She leaned over the gallery railing. "I can't see him, but I believe he's currently dining with Mr. Hart. Lysander tells me he likes his steaks medium rare, which is the mark of a man of good taste."

"It is?"

"Of course, Mrs. Diamond," came the reply. "I wouldn't entertain matching any of my clients with a man who orders his steak *well done*. In my view, if a man asks for his steak well done, then he should be shown the door."

"And he's dining with Mr. Hart? The banker?"

"The very same," Mrs. Lyon said. "You bank with Hart yourself?"

"I do," Lily said.

Perhaps the soldier was the best option if he came recommended by Dexter Hart. Hart wasn't known for making foolish decisions in matters of business, so it was unlikely he'd be a fool when it came to choosing his friends.

"Very well," Lily said. "I'll trust you to make the right choice."

Mrs. Lyon nodded to the young woman. "See to it, Hermia, would you?"

After the young woman left, Lily returned to the gallery and looked out over the floor. In less than half an hour, she'd be betrothed to a man

she'd never met. But it was just another business transaction. Strangers conducted business with each other every day. Lily herself had been doing so for nearly a decade.



This was a bad idea.

Very bad.

Mason stood in line with eleven other men, each holding a glass filled with a brown liquid. A piece of paper displaying the number eight had been pinned to his front as if he were a bloody racehorse.

How more undignified could a man get?

He swirled his glass and watched as the viscous liquid formed beads on the inside, which thickened, then slipped back into the liquid. Then he glanced along the row at his fellow competitors. Most of them he didn't recognize—young bucks who'd have still been in the schoolroom when he left for the army ten years ago.

On the far end, Dawkins lifted his glass and sniffed the contents, wrinkling his nose in distaste. Mrs. Lyon might run to the finest brandy in all of London, but the laudanum gave it a peculiar smell, not dissimilar to the grease used to clean gun barrels.

At the opposite end, he recognized Viscount de Blanchard, the man's stomach protruding through his waistcoat, displaying the number twelve. Ye gods, was that old lecher still hunting for a woman foolish enough to accept his suit—and most likely the diseases he'd picked up from shagging every whore in town? Admittedly, de Blanchard's protruding stomach gave him advantage, in that he'd start the race a good six inches ahead of the others. And given the rich sauces he must have indulged in over the years, a little laudanum was unlikely to floor a man like de Blanchard—he probably drank the stuff with his morning tea.

"Gentlemen!" A thin, smartly dressed young man, his face half-concealed by a mask, held his hand up. "On the count of three, the competitors must empty their glasses."

He scanned the row of men, and his gaze settled on de Blanchard. "No gamesmanship. You *drink* it."

Mason smiled to himself. That put the cheating bastard in his place.

"The rules are simple," the compère continued. "The first man to

complete a full circuit of the perimeter—or, the man who's run the furthest before collapsing—shall be declared the winner and claim one thousand guineas."

Several of the competitors nodded, waving to their supporters in the crowd.

"The man who is the last to complete the circuit—or who is the first to collapse—must accept the unknown terms as set by the house."

Which meant being shackled to a harridan.

"Again, no gamesmanship. Any man pretending to collapse will forfeit his stake and his membership."

Mason scanned the row to check out the competition. Dawkins was so drunk he could hardly stand. The rest of them seemed unremarkable—mostly young men, who believed their ability to withstand alcohol surpassed their talent for making asses of themselves. Even the greenest recruit into the army would likely drink this lot under the table. The thousand guineas were practically in the bag.

He caught sight of his friend. Hart stood, leaning against the doorway, a look of triumph on his face. It was going to be the easiest money he'd earned in his whole life.

A hush descended on the gaming room, punctuated by the occasional whisper among the onlookers and chink of coins as they placed bets on their favorites.

Hart nodded encouragement, and Mason nodded back, gripping his glass.

"Are you ready?" The compère raised his hand.

"On my count. One..."

The whispers stopped, and the room fell silent.

"Two..."

Mason glanced up toward the gallery. Was the harridan, even now, watching her prey, wondering which one would fall first and succumb to her clutches?

"Three!"

Mason tipped the glass up and swallowed the contents. Almost at once, the bitter taste thickened on his tongue, and he fought the urge to retch. Among a cacophony of coughing, he threw the glass aside and set off. Ahead, he could see Dawkins and two others, and he drew in a deep breath, focusing on anything but the disgusting taste in his mouth.

Dawkins was already slowing, bent double, looking as if he were about to expel his supper over the Black Widow's elegant parquet flooring, and the two men beside him fared no better. One staggered to

one side and crashed into a nearby gaming table with a yelp. He'd be sporting a beautiful bruise tomorrow morning—and would, most likely, struggle to remember what caused it. But with the tenacity of the young when there was male pride and a thousand guineas at stake, he staggered on. Mason only needed to move forward half a dozen steps, and he'd be in the lead.

He increased the pace amid the cheers of the crowd and pushed his way past the leaders, shoving Dawkins to one side. The bitter taste increased as he reached the first corner and turned, following a path along the rear of the room. Ahead, he caught sight of the main exit, a door flanked either side by candle sconces, flickering yellow flames which danced from side to side in unison with the cheering of the crowd.

“Eight! Eight! Eight!”

They were cheering for him.

The doorway began to dance from side to side. If only it would stop moving, he could concentrate on running toward it. As every soldier knew, a moving target was the most difficult to hit. If only the door would stop...

The bitter taste filled his mouth, and the door shifted out of focus and swirled to and fro as the lights on either side burst into a myriad of colors. The cheering increased until it became a thundering roar, like a giant waterfall. Yes—that was it—a waterfall. He was running toward a column of water which sparkled with rainbows, dancing in the sunlight.

The bright, bright sunlight...

As he ran closer, the water drew him in, caressing his skin at first with a delicious coolness. Then the force of the water crushed his chest and sent him plunging toward the ground, where his body exploded, and oblivion claimed him.



When Mason opened his eyes, the water had gone. Muffled voices chattered in the distance, but the dancing light was replaced by a sharp pain that threatened to split his skull in two.

Closing his eyes, he rolled onto his side, and his chest spasmed into a cough.

Bloody hell—his throat was on fire! A memory flashed across his

mind. Something cold and hard forced down his throat—his stomach heaving...

Water—so much water...

And *her*. The memory of her. When he was at his weakest, she always came to him, those pale gray eyes which could always see deep into his soul—and her voice—those soft, gentle tones, whispering secret words of love, pledging herself to him, soothing the ache in his heart.

The only woman he'd ever loved—the memory of her goodness had tormented him for ten years. Each time he lay broken on the battlefield, he'd wondered if he was, at last, getting his just reward for his betrayal of her. Would his next breath be his last, and he'd join her in heaven—or would he be thrust into hell, forever to be parted from her, even in death?

Christ—what the devil had he imbibed to be so damned maudlin?

"You're awake at last." A male voice said—a familiar voice.

"Hart?" Mason croaked.

"The very same."

He opened his eyes again and was assaulted by Hart's clear blue gaze.

"What the devil happened to me?" Mason croaked.

"The Lordy Race," Hart said. "Don't you remember?"

"Ah yes," he croaked. "That confounded race. Why, then, does my throat..." He broke off in a spasm of coughs and winced at the sharp pain in his chest.

"Bloody hell," he rasped. "Why does it feel like I've taken up sword-swallowing at a freak show?"

"That'll be the..." Hart wrinkled his brow into a frown "...*gastric lavage*, I think Mrs. Dove-Lyon called it."

"What the fuck's is that?"

Hart shook his head. "You don't want to know," he said. "I dare say the experience was just as bad for me watching it as it was for you, though you were out cold at the time. All I'll say is that it's a most effective way of removing substances from the body via the same route by which they entered it."

"Too much information," Mason said. "Is the Black Widow in the habit of poisoning her clients?"

"It would seem so," Hart said, "though she's adept at effecting an appropriate antidote. Can you sit?"

"Of course, I bloody can." Mason pushed against the bed and set himself upright. The world around him wobbled a little, then settled.

"I'm assured you'll feel better in a couple of hours," Hart said. "A supper's waiting for you in one of the private rooms. Compliments of the house."

"Didn't we just eat?"

"You lost your supper half an hour ago," Hart said. "A damnable waste of a good steak if you ask me. But at least you get to eat it all over again. Our hostess recommends you steer clear of the rich sauces this time. Béarnaise isn't good for a delicate constitution. But plenty of red meat will restore your strength."

Though he hated to admit it, Mason *was* hungry.

Hart folded his arms and watched Mason, his expression conveying something akin to sympathy.

"What's the matter?" Mason asked. "Did I disgrace myself?"

"No," Hart said. "Mrs. Dove-Lyon is very discreet with her administrations. What came out of your stomach is between us, our hostess, and the rather intriguing young man she employed to tend to you. But I suppose I must congratulate you."

A frisson of hope swelled within Mason. "Good lord—are you telling me that I *won* the race? That the others came off worse than I?"

Hart shook his head. "Dawkins claimed the cash," he said. "It was a close-run thing, but he managed a full circuit of the games room before expelling his supper." A wicked smile crept across his mouth. "He had to leapfrog de Blanchard's prone form to claim victory. And, as to the contents of his stomach—suffice it to say that de Blanchard's valet is going to be in for a nasty surprise tomorrow morning."

Hell.

"So that means..."

"You're engaged to be married. Congratulations."

"You've already said that."

Hart folded his arms. "There's no harm in saying it twice, given that your money worries are over. Whereas I'm ten guineas down."

"My money worries?"

"According to our hostess, your betrothed has a fortune of twenty thousand and an income from a lucrative business." Hart's lips lifted in a smirk. "A *working woman*."

"Oh lord."

Just his luck—he'd been saddled with a prostitute.

"Is she waiting for me now?"

Hart shook his head. "She'll be coming tomorrow to inspect the goods. I've been tasked with making sure you turn up in one piece—or,

rather, that you don't bolt for the hills. Come on—let's get that steak inside you."

Mason let himself be led back into the hall. The gaming had resumed as if the race had never taken place—and as if he'd not been unconscious on the floor half an hour earlier. As he crossed the floor, he glanced up toward the ladies' gallery. Was his newly betrothed watching?

Among the onlookers, stood the shadowy veiled figure of the Black Widow. A woman stood to her left, her form indistinguishable through the haze of cigar smoke as she turned and disappeared into the ladies' parlor. Something about her seemed familiar—a pale face framed by jet black tresses, her eyes glinting in the candlelight.

He shook his head. No—his mind was playing tricks. Perhaps her ghost had come to mock him for letting himself become the property of another for the sake of a few guineas. How she'd laugh at witnessing his family pride—the damnable Redstone pride that had caused such misery—turn to dust as he sold himself for cash.

But even if his Lily could forgive him from beyond the grave, he'd never forgive himself for what he'd done to her.



Chapter Four

Lily sipped her tea and looked around the parlor. In the morning light, the décor seemed less decadent—*tame*, even.

Each time she heard footsteps, her heart fluttered. All she knew of the man she'd become betrothed to was that he had a title, was over forty, and was in dire need of cash.

And that he was unable to stomach his liquor.

She knew nothing more about him. From her position in the ladies' gallery last night, she'd seen a number of male figures, with numbers stuck to them like racing dogs, dash around the gaming room, indistinguishable through the haze of smoke. When the first one collapsed and was carried out of the room by two table hosts, she caught a glimpse of the number eight attached to his front, but the crowd milling round him obscured his features from view.

Shortly after, Mrs. Dove-Lyon had joined her on the gallery to congratulate her on her engagement to an earl—a retired colonel who'd distinguished himself at Waterloo.

An earl! How ironic, given that it was an earl who had thrown Lily and her mother onto the street.

And now, she awaited him in a private chamber. She'd been ushered into the ladies' entrance earlier and, after making a brief stop where she handed over her fee to another shadowy figure, her hostess led her into a private room and plied her with tea, as if she were presenting her at Almack's.

A new set of footsteps approached—a man's footsteps—confident and strong, like the march of a soldier.

Lily's stomach tightened, and she drew in a deep breath as the footsteps stopped outside the door.

Then the door opened, and Mrs. Lyon appeared.

“Mrs. Diamond. May I present your betrothed.”

She stepped to one side to reveal the man standing behind her.

A tight knot formed in Lily’s stomach, and she drew in a sharp breath.

Ten years may have passed since she’d last seen him, but she would always recognize the man who’d taken her heart, then cast it aside and destroyed her life.

His tall frame filled the doorway, his presence dominating the room. The years had done nothing to lessen his potency. The air vibrated with the sheer male power of him. Though streaks of silver adorned the hair, which had once been jet black, his eyes still shone with the intensity that could command surrender from the strongest adversary.

Those eyes now widened in disbelief, and his face grew pale. He stepped into the room and shook his head.

“Lily.”

On hearing her name on his lips—the feigned pain in his tone—her resolve almost crumbled. But the wall she’d fashioned round herself had been ten years in the making—and she would not see it crumble before the only man she had ever loved—not when she had others to protect from his pride.

Mason...

The last time she’d spoken his name was when she had cried it out in despair as he coldly told her that he’d cast her aside for another—a woman more suited to his station.

And the time before that? She’d screamed it in ecstasy while he gave her unimaginable pleasure—the rewards of which she had been reaping for ten years.

Never again would that name pass her lips.

“Lord Redstone,” she said coldly.

“Ah—you know each other?” Mrs. Lyon asked. “Good—that makes for a better match, does it not?”

“That rather depends on the circumstances of the acquaintance,” Lily said.

Their hostess ushered him in and gestured toward a chair.

“Please sit,” she said. “I’ll send Helena in with some tea.”

He approached the chair and lowered himself onto the seat.

Almost at once, she leaped to her feet. With a muttered apology, he did likewise, and she smiled to herself, taking petty satisfaction from his discomfort—his damnable pride which had taught him that one of the worst transgressions a man could commit would be to sit in the presence

of a woman.

As she'd learned to her cost, there were far worse transgressions.

Lily turned to her hostess. "Forgive me, Mrs. Lyon," she said. "I fear there's been a gross error. I wish to withdraw from our arrangement."

"Lily..." the treacherous man began to speak, using his honeyed tones to entice her into submission again. She held up her hand. "I'm not addressing you, *my lord*," she said. "Please give me the courtesy of granting me a private audience with Mrs. Lyon. I take it such a request isn't against your *code of conduct*?"

The arrow hit home, and he flinched at the long-ago phrase he'd used against her.

"At least let me speak," he said.

"Lord Redstone, perhaps you'd be so good as to attend us another day?" Mrs. Lyon suggested. "It's not uncommon for a client to show a little—reluctance—when faced with the man to whom she's promised herself."

"But..."

"Please do as I ask." Mrs. Lyon's voice took on a tone that was not to be disobeyed.

Lily recognized it, for she'd used it herself. It was the tone of a woman making a living in the world of men who, by virtue of her sex, had to fight harder and strive to be better, merely to be seen on an equal footing with her male counterparts. And even then, most doors would be closed to her.

"As you wish," he said. Though he tried to meet Lily's gaze, she tilted her head and stuck her nose in the air. Mrs. Lyon cleared her throat, but what did Lily care about propriety?

Mrs. Lyon held out her hand, and he took it and brushed his lips against her skin. Lily's own skin prickled at the memory of his lips—the way he'd taken her fingers into his mouth and caressed them with his tongue, stroking each digit lovingly, tenderly...

Her cheeks warmed at the memory. Even when she believed she'd never see him again, he still had the power to render her breathless—he'd visited her dreams almost every night since he'd abandoned her. Each time he'd crawled on the floor, pledging his love and begging forgiveness, before sweeping her up in his arms and declaring his love to the whole world.

But those dreams had been the wish-fulfilment of a naïve young girl, and she'd be damned if she'd let him invade her dreams again.

After the door closed behind him, Lily let out a breath, not realizing

she'd been holding it. Why was it that he had the power to claim all the air in the room—the power to claim everything within his reach, including her?

"Forgive me, Mrs. Lyon," Lily said, "but I cannot marry that man."

"You signed the contract. Would you renege?"

"There must be another man you could find for me."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question," came the reply. "I have a reputation to uphold. And so, Mrs. Diamond, do you."

"I don't understand."

"My clientele come in expecting a successful match," Mrs. Lyon said, "and that is what I give them. To break a contract not only forfeits your fee but renders it impossible to enter into another such arrangement with you. I take it your objection to your suitor stems from your prior acquaintance, yes?"

Lily's cheeks warmed, and she nodded.

"Is he a cruel man?"

Lily opened her mouth to reply, then she closed it again. To her, he'd once been the kindest man alive. He'd befriended her as a child, and she had worshipped him from afar. *My little flower* he'd called her, promising that nothing would come between them.

But in the end, something did. The one deadly sin he could never conquer.

"Well?" Mrs. Love prompted.

"No," Lily sighed. "He was never cruel—just proud. In the end, it was his pride—the need all titled men have to place their family honor above everything else," she said. "Even love."

"And yet his title is now up for sale," Mrs. Lyon said. "Perhaps he understands the value of his family pride."

"Yes," Lily said bitterly. "He values it at a thousand guineas."

Mrs. Lyon let out a cold laugh. "Every man has his price. It's just a matter of finding out what that price is and deciding whether you're prepared to pay it. Both you and I deal in cash, Mrs. Diamond. You must leave your heart out of it."

"And—my *suitor*?"

"He's a respectable soldier, recently returned from the army on account of his father's death," Mrs. Lyon said. "He's in want of a wife but is determined not to enter into the kind of courtship expected of a man of his rank, hence his coming here."

"How the devil do you know that?"

"This is my establishment, Mrs. Diamond. I make it my business to

know everything that is done—and said—within its walls. It pays to be vigilant. For example, I know that young Ernest Fortescue has a violent allergic reaction to laudanum, therefore he was taken mysteriously ill before given the chance to compete for your hand last night. For though he was certain to have come last in the race, I would not have your betrothed dying at your feet before he'd been able to speak the vows."

"Ernest Fortescue?" Lily asked.

Mrs. Lyon sighed. "Believe me, he wouldn't have done for you. And as for the other contestants..." she shook her head, "...surely you wouldn't prefer a man such as Viscount de Blanchard?"

"Good heavens, no!"

"Then be grateful he wasn't the first to fall," Mrs. Lyon said. "No—Lord Redstone was the most suitable candidate. You won't find one more suited to your specific needs, and I certainly shan't endeavor to find you another. The goods have been delivered, in one piece, still breathing. I have abided by the contract, and so should you."

"Perhaps both parties can agree to break the contract."

"That's for the both of you to sort out amongst yourselves," Mrs. Lyon said. "But you wanted a titled husband at any cost. The cost, in my view, is very reasonable—a pittance, compared to your fortune, and a fiancé who'd make you the envy of most ladies in town."

A knock sounded at the door, and a young woman entered, brandishing a tea tray.

Mrs. Lyon rose to her feet. "Thank you, Helena. Mrs. Diamond will be taking her tea alone and is not to be disturbed. I take it her suitor has gone?"

"Yes, ma'am. Theseus ushered him out five minutes ago."

Mrs. Lyon turned back to Lily. "You may enjoy your tea unmolested," she said, "and I'd encourage you to consider your choices. But in my eyes—and in the eyes of everyone else—you are now betrothed. In less than a month, you'll be Lady Redstone."

With that, she made a dramatic show of sweeping out of the room, closing the door behind her.



Chapter Five

Lily drew in a deep breath, filling her lungs. The docks always assaulted her senses—the smell of seaweed in the air and the cries of the men working to bring the ships into port. Harsh orders barked out, punctuated by a ripe word or two, the hails of the doxies who prowled the docks searching for trade, and the screeches of the seagulls as they circled ahead, which turned into a cacophony of caws as a ship drew into port and the sailors tossed their waste overboard.

Over the years, she'd come to love it—the sounds of activity, the anticipation of a ship arriving and what it would bring—silks from the east, the finest wines from France—and, of course, the thrill of knowing that the safe return of her clients' ships meant a successful outcome for her business.

"Morning, Mrs. Diamond." A young lad occupying the front step of her office building touched his forelock and scrambled off the step.

"How are you today, Freddy?" she asked.

"Not so bad, ma'am," the lad said. "Mr. O'Reilly's ship has returned safe, which is more than I can say for Lord de Blanchard. He lost his ship in that storm off the Atlantic, or so Old Bill says."

Lily laughed. "Old Bill's a bigger purveyor of gossip than his wife." She tossed the boy a shilling, and he pocketed it with a grin and scampered off.

The aroma of steak pie filled Lily's nostrils, and she watched the boy disappear through the door of a small, bow-fronted building. Mrs. Moffett would be making almost as much trade as the doxies on the street. A shipload of hungry sailors would be as desperate for a hot meal as a warm pair of arms, and in less than half an hour, the dock would be swarming with activity.

So, de Blanchard lost his ship, had he? It served the old lecher right.

Lily had refused to conduct business with him—not least because he'd once tried to proposition her, but also because his ships were poorly maintained, and he failed in his due diligence. Pity the poor sailors who'd met their watery graves. Pity also, the Allied London company who'd find themselves subject to a substantial claim. They should also have conducted their due diligence properly. For what was the point in charging a higher premium if the risk was such that the claim was a certainty, which would bring about insolvency?

She pushed through the main doors and climbed the staircase to her office. The familiar rattling noise came from the adjacent room. She paused at the doorway, and the room's occupant looked up from his work. Hunched over his abacus, in his brown jacket, spiky hair, and round glasses, he resembled an industrious hedgehog.

"Morning, Mr. Settle," she said. "Are there any meetings today?"

The clerk reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "Mr. O'Reilly's already sent a message to say he wants to see you tomorrow," he said, "and a prospective account is due later this morning."

"Oh?"

"A new venture," he said. "Stone Shipping, it's called. The proprietor intends to trade in tea. The business has just the one ship but comes highly recommended by the Hart Bank."

"Is the Hart Bank also funding the venture?"

"I believe he's acting as guarantor."

"And he's looking for a commission on the premium, I suppose," Lily said. "Dexter Hart doesn't miss a trick when it comes to making a profit. Why did he not send them to Lloyds?"

"I believe Mr. Hart considers the proprietor to be a man of good quality and therefore able to meet our exacting requirements," the clerk said. "I've agreed to receive him at ten o'clock."

Lily smiled to herself. Mr. Settle's—and her own—notion of a man of good quality was a man who took pains to mitigate his risk, whereas society considered it to be the possession of an old family surname and a disinclination to sully one's hands with hard work.

Society—she shivered at the notion of it. Five days had passed since she'd signed that damned contract with Mrs. Lyon. Sooner or later, the woman would turn up on her doorstep demanding she go through with the contract. But, for now, good, honest work was a welcome distraction.

If only she hadn't told Mama and the girls of her plan, she might

have been able to pretend that she'd never visited the Lyon's Den in search of a husband. Now, Mama expected her to turn up with a duke wrapped up in brown paper like a Christmas parcel, all secured with a pretty ribbon.

"I took the liberty of placing the morning paper in your office," Settle continued, "together with your correspondence and a pot of tea."

Dear Settle! Like any good clerk, he knew how to run the business, whether that meant performing an appropriate risk assessment and premium calculation, or knowing precisely when to have her morning tea ready, just how she liked it, with a slice of lemon in the cup and a dash of honey.

She left him to his calculations and settled at her desk in her office. A pile of papers lay waiting for her approval—Mr. Settle's latest reserving figures—and she smiled at the prospect of reviewing them. The beauty of numbers was that they followed patterns. One only had to learn to recognize those patterns, and the numbers could be trusted to behave as expected. And mathematics was a subject which transcended language barriers. The rules of arithmetic were the same the world over. Numbers could not betray a person, not if they were treated with respect and understanding.

Men, on the other hand...

Curse it! Ever since she'd seen him again, he'd invaded her thoughts and interrupted her dreams. Only last night, she'd woken to the memory of his lips sliding over her skin while she lay, open and helpless, having surrendered herself to the pleasure of his administrations.

Would she ever be rid of him?

Sipping her tea, she set to work. An hour's arithmetic and reason would restore her spirits.

By the time she set aside the papers, her work completed, the sounds from the docks had increased. O'Reilly's ship had docked, and the area outside her offices would be teeming with sailors greeting their wives and loved ones or taking the trade offered by the doxies. She reached for the newspaper and flicked through the pages, curling her lip in distaste at account after account of society parties and what Lord This-And-That did with Miss What's-Her-Name at Lady I-Don't-Care-Who-She-Is's garden party.

Then, her heart skipped a beat as she caught a glimpse of her name.

Dear Lord!

She read the announcement twice to make sure she wasn't imagining it.

This correspondent is delighted to announce the engagement of Mrs. Lily Diamond to Colonel Mason Henry Redstone, eleventh Earl Redstone...

"No..." she whispered.

Almost at once, his voice penetrated her thoughts, the distinctive baritone which had been rumored to serenade many a woman into his bed—the same voice which had melted her resolve and set her on the path to ruination. She closed her eyes, but the voice only grew louder.

Mr. Settle's head appeared round the door. "Begging your pardon, ma'am, but the new policyholder is here."

"Can't you deal with him?" she asked.

"He wishes to see the actuary, not the clerk." Settle glanced over his shoulder to where, presumably, the prospect stood, concealed behind the door. "I told him Mr. Waterman was not available, but you'd be willing to deputize."

Even if he had come recommended by Dexter Hart, the prospect had not ingratiated himself by refusing to deal with Mr. Settle. Lily was almost determined to reject the man's application on principle.

"Very well," she said, tidying the papers on her desk. "Show him in."

"This way, sir," Settle said.

The clerk stepped to one side to reveal his companion, and a small knot formed in Lily's stomach.

Mason Redstone stood in the doorway.



Mason stood outside the white-fronted building and checked the directions Hart had given him. He'd expected the offices of Waterman Allied Insurance to display the kind of sumptuous prominence prevalent among the most successful businesses. But instead, Mr. Waterman clearly favored discretion over opulence. The building looked clean and well-maintained, which counted for something, given the odors emanating from the rest of the docks.

Wrinkling his nose, he approached the main doors and knocked. The door opened almost immediately, and a small, bespectacled clerk appeared.

"Mr. Stone, of Stone Shipping?"

Mason nodded, and the clerk led him inside.

"If you'd care to take a seat in my office, sir, we can discuss your

application to determine whether we can accept your risks.”

His risks? *Pompous little fool!* Did he mean to insult him?

“I was led to believe I could speak to the man in charge,” Mason said. The clerk’s lips curled into a smile as if he were enjoying a private joke.

“Is Mr. Waterman in?” Mason asked.

“No, sir, but the actuary is available when *certain clients* wish to speak to a higher authority in the company.”

Certain clients? Now the man *was* insulting him.

“The actuary?”

The clerk rolled his eyes. “The individual in charge of determining the premium rates.”

“Very well,” Mason said, “I’ll speak to *him*.”

The clerk gave a stiff little bow, then led Mason along the corridor to the end, where the last door bore the nameplate *S. Waterman Esq.* He knocked on the door and pushed it ajar.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” he said, “but the new policyholder is here.”

Ma’am?

A woman?

“Can’t you deal with him?” a female voice spoke.

“He wishes to see the actuary, not the clerk.” He glanced back at Mason. “I told him Mr. Waterman was not available, but you’d be willing to deputize.”

“Very well.” Mason detected a frisson or irritation in the woman’s voice. “Show him in.”

The clerk moved aside. “This way, sir.”

Mason stepped into the room.

Simply furnished, though clean and neat, the room didn’t look like the office of the manager of a successful insurance company. A single desk was at the far end of the room beside a window overlooking the docks, through which he could discern the masts of several ships.

A woman sat at the desk, a quill pen in one hand, an abacus to her left, and a sheaf of papers to her right. She set the pen down and looked up.

A pair of intense gray eyes focused on him, rending him immobile, as they had always been able. They widened, and the irritation in their gaze turned to need before he glimpsed a flash of anger.

“You!” she cried. “Have you come to take pride in your handiwork?”

Her face flushed, giving her usually pale cheeks a delicate bloom,

and her eyes flashed with sparkles of silver—the sparkles which had always glittered when she was aroused. His blood warmed at the memory of those eyes, glistening with passion while she cried his name as he'd buried himself inside her. The memory was as potent as if it were yesterday, and he hardened in his breeches, unable to contain the full force of his need.

She lowered her gaze to his waistline and flicked her tongue out, wetting her lips in an instinctive gesture. Then she set her mouth into a firm line and averted her gaze.

"Twice in one week, Miss de Villiers," he said. "Are you trying to attract my attention?"

"I could say the same thing, seeing as this is my office," she said, tartly. "And it's *Mrs. Diamond* to you."

"You're married?"

"Widowed," she said, her color deepening.

"Ah, that explains it," he said. "Mrs. Lyon said..."

She held up her hand to silence him, then glanced at the clerk. "Mr. Settle, I can deal with this gentleman. I'll call you if I have further need of you."

The little man bowed and disappeared.

She regained her composure and gestured to a chair, but he knew her too well and saw how her hand shook, how she picked up the pen and tapped it on the desk absent-mindedly as if it were an outlet for her tension.

As soon as he sat, she leaned forward.

"What the devil are you doing, disturbing me at work?" she hissed. "Is this some jape at my expense that you've cooked up with Mr. Hart? My opinion of *you* cannot sink further, but I thought better of him."

"Believe me, Lily..." he began, and she flinched at his familiar use of her name, "...I had no idea you were in Mr. Waterman's employ as a—what was it?—an *actuary*."

"You think a woman incapable of such a position?"

"I'm not qualified to comment, given that I have no idea what an actuary is," he said. "Forgive me."

"There are greater sins than ignorance," she said.

"Ouch," he said, leaning back.

"Treachery, for example," she continued. She picked up a newspaper and waved it at him. "I suppose this was *your* idea?" she asked. "Is that why you came here today—to declare victory?"

What the devil was she talking about?

"I came here to insure my ship," he said. "Hart recommended Waterman Allied as my best option for an affordable premium."

He took the paper from her grasp and read the announcement.

"Mrs. Lyon doesn't waste her time," he said.

"Are you saying it's her doing?"

He set the paper aside. "Do you think I'm capable of something as underhand as this?" he asked. "To announce an engagement before securing the lady's consent?"

She said nothing but continued to stare at him. Her eyes gave little away but reflected his own view of himself. It was as if he were looking into a mirror and seeing his true self reflected in her eyes. Not the decorated soldier, the earl, or even the aspiring shipping owner—but the man. The man who'd broken the heart of the only girl he'd ever loved—the girl who had turned into the woman who sat before him now.

"Believe me," he said. "Please, Lily. I told Mrs. Dove-Lyon that I'm more than willing to proceed with the engagement, but I didn't put that announcement in the paper."

"Why should I believe you?" she asked. Her voice faltered, and moisture glistened in her eyes, and he caught a glimpse of the young woman he'd fallen in love with—his vulnerable little flower whom he'd once vowed to protect and love forever.

At length, he lowered his gaze, unable to look her in the eyes or withstand the shame of his betrayal of her.

Her voice grew hard, and the businesswoman returned. "I do not believe we'll be in a position to do business with you, Lord Redstone."

"Why not?" he asked. "Isn't one ship the same as any other?"

She rolled her eyes and sighed as if he were a wayward schoolboy unable to grasp a simple concept. "We are in the business of trading on risks," she said, "but we must also consider the likelihood of a claim on our policies. You must agree that where a claim is near-certain, it would be better for us not to insure the policy. The risks arising from each ship we insure are very different. My underwriters will consider how well the ship is maintained, together with the quality and experience of the captain and crew, and the value placed on the cargo."

She paused, then looked him directly in the eyes. "Some risks are too great to bear. The chance of a total loss is too great for me to accept."

He colored under her gaze. Was she referring to her business—or her heart?

Not for the first time, he cursed his father and the family pride, which had led him to abandon his Lily in favor of a more suitable

match. Where had that pride got him? Both his father and brother were cold in their graves, his stepmother childless and penniless, and his estate in ruins.

"My father..." he began, then he shook his head. His father might have ordered him to marry another, but it was Mason himself who had abandoned Lily, knowing full well what would happen to both her and her mother but choosing to ignore it, telling himself that the preservation of the Redstone line mattered above all.

"I heard about your father," she said, her voice softening. "I'm sorry. Did he suffer much at the end?"

"How can you be sorry?" he asked. "The bastard threw you out on the street! Your mother..."

"I'd prefer not to discuss it," she said. "We cannot change the past, and the death of a man, no matter what he's done, should always be spoken of with respect."

"But we can atone for it," he said. "We—I—can ask forgiveness."

"Why should I forgive you?" she asked. "It was a decade ago, a little late to discuss forgiveness."

He shook his head. "Had Peter not died, we'd be married by now, perhaps with children of our own, like we'd planned."

She bit her lip and closed her eyes, and a tear beaded on her cheek.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to distress you," he said.

She opened her eyes and focused her gaze on the desk in front of her. "Your brother's not to blame for what you did," she said.

"I know," he replied. "I loved him dearly and wish he were alive, with all my heart, for his sake, as well as for mine. I've had ten years to reflect on my pride—the Redstone pride. Such a silly emotion and something which a good dose of army life has cured me of."

She leaped to her feet and placed her fists on the table, her knuckles whitening.

"How can you dismiss it so?" she cried. "That *silly emotion*, as you call it, led to you humiliating me on what would have been the announcement of our engagement! The very night your brother died when he was out cavorting with his mistress instead of attending to his own fiancée!"

He stood, flinching at the force of her anger. "Lily..."

"Oh, now *you'd* rather not speak of it?" she cried. "Perhaps you can forget easily what you did, but I never have! Within an hour of your brother being killed, you cast me aside in favor of his fiancée, all for the greater good of the Redstone ancestral line!"

“Lily, please...”

“Does the truth pain you now, Mason?”

“You must understand,” he said. “Lady Wilhelmina was destined to become Lady Redstone, and Father made it clear that when a younger son unexpectedly becomes the heir, then it’s not unusual for him to betroth himself to the woman his older brother intended to marry. It’s often done—consider Henry the Eighth.”

Even before he finished the sentence, the folly of it hit him in the gut. While trying to excuse what he’d done to her, he was only making himself appear even more of a cad.

She let out an unladylike snort. “If I recall, that particular monarch was known for having something of a commitment problem,” she said. “He may have married his brother’s intended, but he cast her aside in favor of another when she failed to give him a male heir. I suppose if your father hadn’t tossed me out on the street, you’d have made me your whore—which is only marginally better than having my head cut off when you grew tired of me.”

He reached over and gripped her shoulders. “How can you say that of me?” he cried. “Don’t you know how desperately I searched for you? I realized my folly and couldn’t go through with marrying Lady Wilhelmina. I wanted *you*. But when I came looking, you’d already gone.”

“Your father’s steward was a most efficient man,” she said. “He arranged our carriage to London and threatened to shoot us if we returned.”

“Mr. Ellis?”

“The very same.”

Anger swelled within him, rising like bile until he caught the bitter taste in this mouth—the taste of love lost.

“Dear Lord!” he said. “Mr. Ellis was the one who led the search for you. He spent months traveling to London and back until he told me you’d died. I spent ten years thinking you were dead because of him! The bloody bastard!”

“He was only acting on your father’s orders!” she cried, her voice breaking. “Why are you any different to him?”

“Because I love you!”

She froze, her eyes widening, then he pulled her to him and crushed her mouth with his own. For a brief moment, she struggled, then she yielded and curled her hands round his neck and drew him to her, opening her mouth.

He needed no encouragement. Years of unmet passion burst within him, and he thrust his tongue into her mouth, claiming her as his. For, no matter what had befallen them since they parted, she was and had only ever been—his.

His manhood strained in his breeches, and the hunger for her became almost unbearable, the pleasure morphing into pain as he drank from her, taking everything she offered. A groan bubbled in his chest as she clung to him, feasting on him as he feasted on her—twin souls who'd almost died of thirst over the years, finally reaching the oasis.

He needed her closer. That damned desk was as much of a barrier as his bloody father had been. Gripping her shoulders, he lifted her up, and she willingly yielded until she kneeled before him on the desk, pressing her body against his. He ground himself against her, wanting to ease the ache in his manhood, but knowing that only one thing would satisfy the burning need. She parted her thighs, and he released one shoulder, fumbling with an urgency that overcame him, reaching for her skirts which bunched around her knees.

He almost spent as his fingers met the warm, smooth flesh at the top of her stocking. He slid his hand higher, closer to the sweet place.

"Sweet Lord, I want you, my Lily," he said, his voice hoarse with the need to possess her. "Fate has reunited us—why resist? Let me reclaim you now, for you were—and always will be—*mine*."

She stiffened, and the arms which previously drew him to her now pushed him away.

"Lily?"

She scrambled off the desk, smoothing down the front of her dress.

"I belong to no man!" she cried. The distress in her tone contrasted the raw lust in her eyes, but she moved behind the desk, backing away from him.

"Forgive me, Lily," he said, shaking his head. "I lost control. I don't know what came over me."

No, *that was a lie*. He wanted her—more than ever, he felt the pull within his body—the base need to bury himself inside her. He drew in a deep breath to clear the fog of lust and resumed his seat.

A cheer rose up from outside—most likely another ship arriving—and she glanced out of the window as if she'd woken from a trance. Then she sat, and her clear gray gaze focused on him. The hard-faced businesswoman had replaced the sweet-natured girl he'd betrayed.

He gestured round the office. "You've done well," he said. "I'm proud of you."

Her eyes narrowed, and her mouth set in a thin line.

"How came you to work here?" he asked. "Hart tells me this is a prosperous operation."

"Fate gave me a second chance."

"And you took it with both hands." He smiled at the memory of the eager little girl who'd grown up near his father's estate—the bright flower with the sharp gray eyes. "I always thought that had you been born a man, you'd very likely be running a business, if not the country."

"But I wasn't born a man, was I?"

"Nevertheless," he added, "I'm a firm believer in the benefits of a second chance."

She didn't respond. Instead, she picked up the quill pen on her desk and scraped her thumbnail along the shaft, and he noticed an ink-stain on the pad of her thumb and the cracked skin around her knuckles. Guilt needled at him. Had he not forsaken her, she'd have spent her days being pampered and loved in Redstone Manor, her skin kept as smooth as it was the day she was born. The little lines he saw around her eyes would be absent, as would the resolute expression in her eyes, rendering the soft gray as hard as steel.

Her hand shook—almost imperceptibly, but he knew her too well—and she set the quill pen down, her chest rising and falling in a sign of resignation.

"Very well," she said. "Perhaps I acted in haste earlier—ignored the voice of reason. I've decided to give you a second chance."

Hope burst within him. He'd not expected it to be so easy, but a love like that they had shared could never die completely. It might weather the storm of betrayal, but, like a sturdy ship, it would survive to sail the seas another day.

This very afternoon he could make the arrangements—speak to the parson on the Redstone estate and have the banns read on Sunday. Within a few short weeks, they could be married and forget the past ten years had ever happened.

"You have no idea how delighted I am to hear that," he said.

"I don't doubt it," she replied, her tone remaining business-like. "Our rates are competitive."

What was she saying?

"I don't understand," he said.

"I'm saying that I'm prepared to consider your application for insurance, provided the paperwork's in order."

"Insurance?"

She arched an eyebrow, a dark black wing defining her features. "That's your purpose in coming here, is it not?"

"It was, yes," he said, "but..."

"Good. That's settled then," she said, rising. "I'll ask Mr. Settle to arrange a meeting with Mr. Aldwych, and we can discuss the details then."

"Who the devil's that?" Mason asked.

"The underwriter," she replied, irritation in her voice. "I take it you know what an underwriter is? It's not only my..." she hesitated, "...*Mr. Waterman's* business needs to be satisfied as to the degree of risk in your enterprise. Mr. Aldwych is our co-insurer, and I must seek his approval."

"Can't you agree to insure me now?" he asked. "I come with Dexter Hart's recommendation."

"That recommendation has merely granted you an interview, Lord Redstone," she said. He shivered at the flat business-like tone of her voice. Was this the passionate woman he'd almost kissed into oblivion not five minutes earlier?

"We're not in the business of exposing ourselves to large risks on our own," she said. "Therefore, I'll need to bring in others. It's common practice, particularly when the insured party is an unknown entity. Besides, Mr. Aldwych understands more about the shipping industry than I ever can." She focused her direct gaze on him. "I know, and understand, my limitations. I rely on Mr. Aldwych to determine whether a risk is worth accepting. I'm not in the business of making promises which I cannot keep. Reneging on a promise is considered the very worst kind of treachery."

She lifted her gaze to his. "At least—it is in the city."

He squirmed in his seat. Did she delight in making him uncomfortable?

But she was merely stating a fact. Perhaps that was why his conscience pricked him so deeply. A matter-of-fact statement did more to emphasize his treachery, and he found his heart cracking at the notion that she seemed to have accepted it as an act borne of his character rather than a foolish mistake for which he'd suffered for the past decade.

She opened a journal and scanned the pages. "Shall we say next week?" she asked. "Mr. Aldwych would be happy to attend us here, but I suspect his offices at the Royal Exchange would be more suited to your tastes."

"Whatever you decide," he said.

“Good. I’ll ask Mr. Settle to make the arrangements.”

She rose to her feet and held out her hand, clearly believing the interview to be over.

He caught the slight tremor and took her hand, curling his fingers round her wrist. She closed her eyes, and her nostrils flared slightly. When she opened them, a sheen of moisture glistened, turning the gray into liquid silver.

“Is that it?” he asked. “Are we not going to discuss...” he nodded toward the newspaper, “...the matter of our engagement?”

“I’m busy today.”

“Must I make an appointment?” he asked. “Perhaps to discuss the degree of risk to which you will become exposed on accepting my suit? If I were to be permitted to plead my case, I would assure you that I’m not in the habit of drinking a cocktail of brandy and laudanum to the point where I vomit over my shoes.”

Her lip twitched into a smile.

“Why did you do it?” she asked.

“Drink a potentially lethal drink?” He shrugged his shoulders. “Male pride, I suspect,” he said. “It seemed like a good idea at the time—a bounty of a thousand guineas if I won and a rich wife if I lost.”

“At least you’re honest,” she said, “if a little calculating in your method of courtship.”

“You wanted a titled husband,” he retorted. “Isn’t that what women go to the Lyon’s Den to procure for themselves?”

Her eyes narrowed, and he regretted the words almost as soon as he’d uttered them.

“I wasn’t just thinking of myself,” she said.

“Neither was I,” he replied. “I wasn’t looking for love. I had given up on that a long time ago, since...” He gestured toward her, then sighed. “I saw no point in parading myself round the Marriage Mart, to have some mama thrusting her debutante daughter in front of me—particularly if the debutante was expecting to be loved. No—I admit I wanted a woman with cash to spare, who wasn’t looking for love. That night, as soon as I’d recovered from the race, Mrs. Dove-Lyon assured me she’d found exactly what I required—a woman willing to trade cash for a titled husband, who had no wish to be loved.”

She tried to withdraw her hand, but he tightened his grip.

“Did she speak the truth?” he asked softly. “Do you have no wish to be loved?”

She blinked, and a tear splashed onto her cheek.

“Didn’t your husband love you?” he asked.

She frowned. “My husband?”

“The late Mr. Diamond.”

“Oh...” she hesitated. “I prefer not to speak of him.”

Her composure dissolved as footsteps clattered outside the door, accompanied by excited female voices.

“No...” she mouthed. She snatched her hand free and glanced about her as if looking for a means of escape.

The door opened, and he turned to see a primly dressed woman accompanied by two young girls.

“Mrs. Brook!” Lily cried.

“Begging your pardon, Mrs. Diamond,” the woman said, glancing at Mason, “I didn’t realize you were otherwise engaged. We’ll wait with Mr. Settle. Come along, Belinda, Amelia. Your mama’s busy.”

She retreated, closing the door behind her.

Mason glanced at the woman before him, whose face was flushed a deep shade of pink.

“They’re your children?” he asked.

She nodded.

“When were you going to tell me you had children?”

“I wasn’t aware it was any of your business.”

“It is if they’re my children also.”

The color drained from her face. “I think it’s time you left,” she said.

“Lily...”

“Please!” she cried, then composed herself. “Please go.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but his conscience held him back. Her hands were curled into fists, and her whole body shook with distress. He ached to take her into his arms, but hostility glittered in her expression. The best thing he could do was leave her alone.

But he wouldn’t let her go without a fight. Not now he’d found her again.



Chapter Six

As the footman at the door let Lily into her house in Shoreditch, she was accosted by two whirlwinds.

“Mama! You’re late!”

“We’ve already had our supper.”

“We had *such* fun after we left your office today!”

“Mrs. Brook took us to see Mr. O’Reilly’s ship. He was just as friendly as you said. He showed us the deck, and...”

“Oh, dash it, Millie! *I* was going to tell her.”

“You can *both* tell me about your day,” Lily said, opening her arms. Her daughters ran toward her, almost knocking her over, and she curled her arm around them and bent her head, closing her eyes as she breathed in the scent of fresh lavender.

Nothing mattered except them. And if that meant the world viewed her as a title-hunting harridan, then so be it. She wanted for her girls that which she’d been denied—acceptance in society. She might revile society and all that it stood for, but she was not so naïve that she couldn’t appreciate that acceptance often came with a title, and with acceptance, her girls would never have to suffer the same humiliation as she.

She closed her eyes and sighed. How ironic that in her quest to find a man willing to give her and her daughters the respectability that came with his title, Fate had delivered into her lap the last man she ever expected to see again, and the only man she’d ever loved.

The man who, in the end, had rejected her for not having a title herself.

“Is that you, Lily, dear?” a voice called out.

“Yes, Mama!” she replied.

A hand slipped into each of hers, as her daughters led her up the

staircase guarded by statues of Mama's favorite goddesses—Diana and Fortuna—and into the parlor where Mama sat beside the fireplace, her flame-red hair now streaked with gray, a thick plaid blanket on her lap.

Despite all that had befallen her, Mama was still a handsome woman. Lily crossed the floor and took her mother's hands.

"How have you been today, Mama?"

"Very well," Mama said, the only evidence of her illness a slight lisp. "Belinda and Amelia have had their supper, but I said I'd wait until you were home and eat mine with you. Betsy made me fish broth from her brother's stall—a passable bouillabaisse, though I can't be done with the new fashion of adding saffron."

"We can afford it, Mama," Lily said.

"Yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's any better, *tesora*," Mama retorted. "If I could make it myself..." she held up her left hand, the fingers bent into a claw. "I managed to sew a button on my gown today," she said.

Lily studied her mother's face—the slight drooping of the left side.

"Did Doctor McIver visit you today?" she asked.

Mama shook her head. "Mrs. McIver came instead," she said, "but she remained here all morning, while Mrs. Brook was out with the girls." She glanced at Lily, her eyes radiating a sharp intelligence that belied the distorted appearance of her face.

"I trust you didn't pay her too much to tend to me, Lily-Marie."

"It's nothing," Lily said.

"I can make do by myself," Mama said. "I have the servants for company."

"But I know you enjoy Mrs. McIver's company," Lily said. "And you must admit, she's done wonders for your recovery. Think where you were a year ago! That fool Dr. Lucas said you had no hope of getting better."

"You must admit—in that he was right," Mama said. "I'll never fully recover. It breaks my heart to be such a burden on you."

"After all you've done for me?" Lily cried. "I'll not hear any more talk about your being a burden."

She sat beside Mama and took her hand, caressing the paper-thin skin. Try as she might, she could never dispel the image of Mama, collapsed on the floor, her body stiff and cold. What good fortune that Lily had been home at the time—and not a day passed that Lily didn't thank the Almighty that her children were spared the horrors of discovering their grandmother, her body twisted, eyes wide open, as if

in death.

A seizure, Dr. Lucas had said, stemming from a misalignment of the humors—or some such rot. Fortunately, Dr. McIver—a straight-talking Scot who had come highly recommended by her banker—had explained that Mama had suffered a mild seizure which looked worse than it was, arising from a blood clot in the brain, which had affected the left side of her body. He'd assured Mama that with regular exercise of the affected parts of the body, she might regain most of their use. And unlike Dr. Lucas, he'd spoken directly to Mama rather than pretend that she was either not in the room or not in possession of sufficient wit to understand everything he was saying.

A year on and Mama would never be able to walk without the need for assistance or regain the full use of her left hand—but she was at least free from pain, and their fortune enabled the family to spend the winter in Bath and indulge in the waters there.

The longcase clock in the hall chimed eight times, and as if on cue, Lizzie appeared in the doorway.

“Begging your pardon, Mrs. Diamond, but it’s the girls’ bedtime.”

A chorus of protests ensued, but Lily held up her hand. “Run along, girls,” she said. “You’ve a busy day tomorrow. Mr. Brown is coming for your mathematics lesson.”

Amelia, the youngest by twenty minutes, wrinkled her nose, but Belinda’s face broke into a smile.

“Say good night to your grandmama,” Lily said.

The girls needed no instruction. They approached Mama’s seat, and each one, in turn, gave her a curtsy and kissed her hand. Mama waved her hand at them.

“Be off with you, troublesome girls!” she cried, her smile of affection belying her stern words.

Giggling, the children followed Lizzie out of the parlor, their laughter echoing around the hallway as they ascended the staircase.

Lily settled into the seat next to Mama and watched the fire—the flames flickering as they danced over the logs.

“Is something the matter, Lily-Marie?” Mama asked.

“Why would you say that?”

“Ever since you returned from Bessie’s Den, you’ve been out of sorts.”

Mama was too perceptive for her own good—but then, her perception had served her very well in her chosen profession—or rather, the profession into which she’d been forced when the old Lord Redstone

had thrown them out.

Lord Redstone...

Was there no escaping that family?

"Are you ever going to tell me what happened?" Mama asked. "I'm no fool—I know why you went to see her. After all, I've known Bessie for over a decade and understand her trade—as she understands mine."

Lily colored at the reference to Mama's previous occupation, and a thin hand took hers.

"There's no need for shame, *tesora*. It put food on our table and made you the woman you are today."

Mama patted her hand. "I take it you did not approve of Bessie's choice of husband?"

"Bessie's choice?" Lily asked.

Mama gave a laugh. "Of course," she said. "My old friend is shrewd enough to understand what makes a good match. You didn't think the games in her Den are truly random, do you? The Hand of Fate takes an active part in the matches—or should I say, the Hand of Bessie."

Lily blinked back tears, and Mama's smile disappeared.

"My love, something *is* the matter, isn't it?"

Not trusting herself to speak, Lily nodded.

"Are you perhaps regretting your decision?" Mama asked.

"It's not that I regret my decision," Lily said, "but..."

"There's something amiss with Bessie's choice? Is it someone we know?"

Lily closed her eyes and turned her head away.

"It's *him*, Mama," she said. "He's returned."

She had no need to tell Mama who *he* was.

"*Oh Dio*," Mama whispered.

Lily bit her lip, hoping that the physical pain would distract from the pain in her heart.

"He came to the offices today, Mama."

"To discuss the arrangements?"

Lily shook her head. "No, he came to take out a policy—it was just a coincidence."

"There's no such thing," Mama said. "Did you send him away?"

"Not at first," Lily said. "I..."

Her breath caught at the memory of his lips on hers—his hands pulling her to him and her inability to do anything but surrender to her desires—desires she thought had been long buried, but they burned as brightly as they'd burned a decade ago.

A sob swelled in her throat. "Mama, I tried to...but I couldn't...I..."

"I understand, *tesora*."

Mama leaned forward and drew Lily into an embrace, rocking her to and fro, as she had done when Lily was a child—at night when she'd been plagued by nightmares and during the long nights after they'd arrived in London when Lily was nursing her broken heart.

"It must be serious," Mama said. "My little Lily-Marie has not shed a tear since the day she brought my grandchildren into the world."

Then she stiffened, and her voice took on a note of fear.

"Does he know?"

Lily shook her head. "No. Dear Lord—what if he finds out?"

"Everything you do—and did—is for them," Mama said, caressing Lily's hair. "You cannot cry over what you lost or what they have missed out on. You've given them the best possible life with the resources available to you."

"Everything I've done has been for them," Lily said, "but they were denied a father."

"You fought and worked hard for those girls," Mama said. "Think what you've achieved! Would you have been permitted to do that had their father married you? No—you'd have been confined to a manor house, living as a brood mare with the sole purpose of producing a male heir. Instead, you're running a successful business and enjoying independence. You've nothing to reproach yourself for."

"Is Fate reproaching me?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Mama said.

"You said there was no such thing as a coincidence," Lily said. "Is it not ironic that I set out to find a man prepared to be a father to the girls—and the very man placed before me is..." She broke off, unwilling to say it aloud. For in speaking the words, it made it real, a tangible thing that must be admitted and atoned for.

Her daughters might carry the name of Diamond—but it was a name which did not exist. Their father was not the imaginary Mr. Diamond who Lily had created in order to give herself respectability in the world of commerce.

Their father was Mason Redstone.



Chapter Seven

Lily dipped her spoon into the broth, her stomach growling at the aroma of fish and saffron. She hadn't realized how hungry she was. Mason's visit to the Waterman building today had preyed on her mind for the remainder of the day, to the point where she'd made several mistakes in her calculations—and ended up missing her lunch break.

Which was why she'd remained in the offices two hours after Mr. Settle had left—and why she was so devilish hungry.

Sitting opposite, Mama dipped her spoon into her broth, her hands shaking. But Lily knew better than to help Mama, who insisted on maintaining her independence—more so since she'd recovered so much of the function in her body. Occasionally Lily saw Mama blush as a drop of food spilled onto the tablecloth, but what did it matter? There were no lords or ladies to criticize or to complain about the need to refresh the tablecloth after every meal.

It was one of the stipulations Lily had set out in her contract with Mrs. Lyon.

Clause five, section six: No criticism should pass the groom's lips with regard to the bride's mother.

Had *he* read it?

"Lily-Marie? *Tesora*?" Lily looked up at the gentle inquiry.

"What is it, Mama?"

"You've spilled your broth."

Lily looked down. Her hand, which had been poised before her mouth, was shaking, and the contents of the spoon had long since fallen onto her dress. A long, dark stain ran down the bodice, and a small piece of what looked like John Dory had settled on her lap.

"Forgive me, Mama," Lily said, eyeing the stain. "Helen will not be pleased with the work I've caused her."

"She can add it to the multitude of tablecloths and gowns which I soil on a regular basis each meal," Mama said. "But I wasn't remarking on the spillage—but on your expression. You must be distressed to see Mason Redstone after all these years."

"My distress is only because I'm reminded of how we were treated," Lily said. "What you had to do to survive our eviction..." She shook her head. "I cannot bear that you suffered, whereas he was unaffected by what he did. They were all unaffected—it's just not fair."

"*Tesora*, you're too intelligent to believe that we live in a fair world," Mama said. "And I happen to know that the family *did* suffer. Not the old Lord Redstone, perhaps, but they felt some retribution for what they did."

"How do you know?"

Mama sighed. "I had hoped never to have to tell you this, but now young Lord Redstone has returned, perhaps I should confess my part."

"Your part in what?"

"In restoring the *balance of equity*—isn't that what you businesswomen say?"

Lily's skin tightened at the guilt in Mama's expression. "What did you do?"

"I saw Lord Redstone—the old earl, several times in London," Mama said, her eyes moistening.

"You saw him?" Lily asked. Then, realization dawned on her as the guilt in Mama's eyes deepened. "Oh, dear Lord—was he one of your..." She picked up her glass and swallowed a mouthful of wine, "One of your *patrons*?"

"Forgive me, my love," Mama said. "I saw an opportunity and took it."

"What opportunity?"

"Bessie had introduced me to a number of discerning patrons—men willing to part with a fortune in cash if I..." Mama gestured erratically with her hand.

She had no need to complete the sentence.

If I parted my thighs.

"And you let him?"

Mama's blush deepened. "I saw it as retribution—payment for throwing us out on the street. With each encounter, I hated him all the more, but my hatred drove me forward." She shook her head. "The memory of it still disgusts me—but I took pleasure out of knowing that nobody—least of all the great Lord Charles William Redstone—knew

that the famous, much-sought-after courtesan La Flamme was none other than Lady de Villiers, the impoverished baronet's widow he'd tossed aside. I took even greater pleasure in charging—*Charlie-boy*—a small fortune each time I serviced him. I considered it payment—retribution for his sins against us.”

Charlie-boy?

Lily set her spoon down, the once-delicious broth turning to ash in her mouth.

“How could he not know, Mama?” she asked. “Was he not playing you for a fool?”

“*He* was the fool,” Mama said. “Like all men who pay for sex, they take little interest in the faces of the woman they inflict their attentions on.”

“Mama—what if he'd got you with child?”

“At my age?” Mama laughed. “I was always careful, *cucciola mia*, and Bessie had a tincture which she always gave me, after...”

“Please, Mama—there's no need to elaborate.”

Mama sighed. “You must be ashamed of me.”

“No,” Lily said. “Never ashamed. You did what you had to, and I'll never be able to repay you—you put food on the table and gave me a better education than I could have hoped for, had Papa not left us penniless. If I feel shame, it is for myself—for not appreciating your sacrifice.”

“Others were also sacrificed by his actions,” Mama said. “Young Mason suffered his father's disappointment, and it drove him out of the country. I often thought of telling you, for Mason's sake—I saw how much he cared for you, but you were hurting at the time and couldn't bear to hear his name. Forgive me for not telling you, *tesora*. I did what I thought was best.”

Mama was right. Heartbroken, sick with her pregnancy, and afraid, Lily had shut down all mention of Mason's name. No matter how desperately he claimed to have looked for her, she would have turned him away if he'd found her. Her own pride prevented her from wanting to see him again—the man who'd claimed his own brother's fiancée and could only ever see Lily as his mistress.

“I'll never admonish you, Mama,” Lily said. “You're the one person in the world who has never betrayed me.”

“I only wish you'd not suffered so!” Mama sighed. “But we came out of it stronger. Others were less fortunate.”

Lily snorted. “Lord Redstone is dead—I doubt he cares one way or

another what happened, now. And Mason will survive. His estate might be bankrupt, but he has a title which will render him acceptable among society.”

“But his widow...” Mama said.

“He married again?”

“Did young Mason not tell you? Lord Redstone married Lady Wilhelmina.”

Lily snorted. “So, she became Lady Redstone after all. Mason told me she’d been destined for it. Well, I hope it was worth it.”

“I doubt it,” Mama said. “During sex, Charlie liked to compare me to his wife—favorably of course, perhaps as a form of flattery to entice me to pleasure him further. Over the years, he grew to resent her—said he’d been obliged to pick up his sons’ leavings because nobody else would have her.”

“She was a wealthy heiress who looked down her nose at us,” Lily retorted. “I’m sure she had her pick of the ton, and she only has herself to blame if she chose the wrong earl.”

“Not according to Charlie,” Mama said. “Her parents had already forsaken her, declaring her to be the property of the Redstone family. Her reputation was in tatters through no fault of her own—first, her betrothed died in a carriage accident while on a drunken ride with his mistress—then his younger brother offered for her, then promptly jilted her. It was left to the father to take her on. Charlie always told me that her parents described her in the manner of a broodmare. In their desperation to be rid of her, they claimed that she came from excellent stock and would provide him with a whole litter of sons.”

“And?”

“Those sons never arrived,” Mama said. “Charlie likened himself to Henry the Eighth, complaining that he’d been cursed by a witch into a marriage which bore little fruit. The few children she had either died shortly after birth or never survived the pregnancy. *Barren little bitch*—he once referred to her.”

Lily set her glass aside as a wave of nausea threaded through her.

“Sweet Lord!” she cried. “Is this true?”

“I suspect part of it is true,” Mama said. “Charlie was prone to exaggeration. But the Lady Wilhelmina is, perhaps, to be pitied. For she, out of all of us, has suffered the worst fate.” Mama’s eyes glistened, and a tear splashed into her broth. “When I heard him speak of that poor young woman, it was the first and only time I felt shame for what I was doing. I suspect young Mason has returned, now his father has died, in

order to restore the estate and ensure she's not left destitute."

"Then why doesn't he marry *her*?" Lily asked. "Why enter into the sort of contract Mrs. Lyon trades in?"

Mama laughed, "*Cucciola mia*, the answer to that question is simple."

"Is it?"

"Of course! Unable to secure his heart's true desire, he has returned to seek solace in marrying a woman of means—as second best."

"His heart's desire?"

"Lily-Marie, *tesora*," Mama said, giving an indulgent smile. "Can you not see? He never stopped loving *you*."

Unable to respond, Lily continued eating. Her lips still tingled from the kiss they'd shared only that morning, the physical connection between them as strong as ever. She'd felt his need for her, evident in the bulge in his breeches when he'd pulled her into his arms, and, weak with the fog of need, she'd been all too prepared to give herself to him.

But the connection wasn't just physical. Her soul had cried out when she'd seen him in the Lyon's Den, and it had taken all her willpower to send him away. When Fate dropped him into her office, her resistance had crumbled. The wall she'd built around herself, which had been necessary to survive—the wall which had remained impenetrable through the years, even though suitors came and went—now showed cracks. Small cracks, but they were the first sign of weakness. Only one man had the ability to penetrate the cracks and bring her defenses tumbling to the ground.

And that one man was Mason Redstone.

"Will he be coming to visit?" Mama asked.

Lily jumped at Mama's voice. "N-no."

"But you're betrothed, are you not? Isn't that the whole purpose of your having visited Bessie?"

Lily shook her head. "I wanted to do what I felt was right for the girls," she said. "But now..."

"Now, when faced with the reality of a husband-to-be, you're having second thoughts?" Mama prompted, "Especially when that husband-to-be is the one man capable of claiming your heart?"

"I have no heart, Mama," Lily said, "at least not outside our family."

"That's where you're wrong," Mama said. "Your heart has always been his. Perhaps, now you've weathered the storms of misfortune, your heart is sturdy enough to withstand the greatest trial of all."

"Which is?"

Mama smiled. "Coming face to face with the man you love." She

pushed her soup bowl aside and leaned forward, her voice growing in strength. “Will you tell him?”

“Tell him what?”

“That he’s a father.”

Lily shook her head. “I can’t, Mama. Think what might come of it!”

“Surely you don’t think he’d take them away?”

“Just let him try!” Lily cried. “He didn’t take care of them with little to live on—he didn’t rock them to sleep every night or nurse them through the ague. And he never taught them how to shift for themselves in a harsh world. No—he’d either have cast them aside and rejected them as he rejected me, or he’d have taken them from me, shoved them in the care of some stuffy governess to be turned into the kind of prissy little maidens who look down on us!”

“Isn’t that what you’re trying to achieve for them by finding a titled husband?” Mama asked.

“No,” Lily said. “All I’m doing is giving them the opportunity to move in society if they so wish it—an opportunity that was denied us.”

“And now, *tesora*, you’re in the unique position of being able to give them a father—a proper father,” Mama said. “I know you think him a cad, but cad or not, he has a right to know.”

Mama was right. In her heart, Lily knew that he must be told, whatever the outcome. Perhaps that was why Fate had brought them together again—not to marry, but in order for him to meet the children he didn’t know he had.

But what if Fate decreed that he’d reject them—or worse—take them from her?



Chapter Eight

"I think we have a deal, Lord Redstone. If you'll just sign here, we can conclude the matter."

The thin, balding man sitting across the desk in the offices of the Aldwych Syndicate pushed a piece of parchment under Mason's nose.

"I trust the premium is acceptable?"

"Very much so, Mr. Aldwych," Mason replied. "Mr. Hart said the rates would be competitive. I was expecting to have to pay a greater premium. You have my thanks."

"You should direct your gratitude toward the accuracy of Mrs. Diamond's calculations."

The woman sitting next to Mason nodded her head in acknowledgment.

"I rather expected Mr. Waterman himself to attend us today," Mason said. "After all, he's acquired a new client."

She colored and exchanged a glance with Aldwych. "Mr. Waterman was unavailable," she said. "He cannot be expected to attend every new policyholder."

"Quite so," Aldwych added.

Mr. Waterman was indeed an elusive creature. Mason could almost have believed that he was a figment of everyone's imagination, but Dexter Hart had mentioned in Whites last night that Waterman visited him on a regular basis. He even sang the man's praises, citing him as one of his bank's first major accounts.

And the man had managed to secure Lily's services.

Lucky bastard.

Mason glanced at her again. She looked uncomfortable, a slight tremor in her hand as she read the paperwork.

"Is aught amiss, Mrs. Diamond?" Aldwych asked.

"No, all is well." She picked up the quill pen and added her signature to the document.

But something bothered her. She kept glancing at Mason as if on the brink of saying something.

Perhaps she was steeling herself to break their engagement. After all, she'd made it clear that she had no intention of going through with it.

But he found himself wanting her. Badly. The urge to lift her skirts and rut her over Aldwych's mahogany table was almost too great to resist, and as soon as he'd seen her that morning, his cock had stiffened painfully in his breeches. He shifted position as it twitched again in eagerness, and he closed his eyes, trying to picture the most unpalatable image possible to cool his ardor—his great-aunt Amanda in her silk drawers. That should do it—her rolls of ample flesh spilling over the top of her bodice and the odor of cabbage which had always seemed to circulate around her.

But he didn't just want Lily's body. He wanted her heart. And her hand. Fate and coincidence might have thrust them together as a result of Mrs. Dove-Lyon's bizarre games. But what Fate and coincidence brought together, Mason had no wish to see torn asunder.

Lily was going to marry him—and he'd fight heaven and earth to make sure that happened.

The policy secured, he rose and shook Mr. Aldwych's hand, then exited the office, accompanied by his fiancée.

And, damn it—that's exactly what she was, whether she liked it or not.

As they stepped out into the street, they almost bumped into a black-clad clerk, who moved aside and tipped his hat.

"Mrs. Diamond!" he cried. "A pleasure to see you, as always."

"Thank you, Mr. Atkins," she said. She glanced at Mason. "Are you acquainted with Lord Redstone?"

"Ah yes!" he replied. "Most obliged, your lordship. Mr. Aldwych said you were visiting today. I trust everything's in order with the policy."

"It is," she replied. "We are now officially on risk."

"And I believe further congratulations are due," the man said. "I wish you both every happiness."

She stiffened, and Mason tightened his grip on her arm. Undeterred, the clerk continued. "Most surprised I was, to read it in the papers last week. I said to my wife, 'you'll never believe it! The one woman I thought most deserving of marriage, yet the one least likely to find a man worthy of her'..." he hesitated and glanced at Mason. "Begging

your pardon, your lordship, I meant no disrespect. It was a compliment to Mrs. Diamond here. I often wondered if she'd settle, what with those delightful children needing a father."

Mason glanced at the woman on his arm. Her face looked as white as chalk against her raven black hair.

"Believe me, Mr. Atkins," he said. "I'm fully aware of my good fortune in securing the hand of such a remarkable woman. I'll do everything in my power to make her happy."

The clerk bowed, then disappeared inside the building.

"Tea?" Mason asked.

She looked up at him, a vacant expression in her eyes, then she shook her head. "Forgive me. I must be getting home."

"Permit me to escort you."

She sighed in resignation as if all the fight had left her. Then she nodded. "Very well."

They walked along the pavement, neither saying a word. The silence reminded him of their first excursions together, when he, as a young man without a care in the world, had wooed the bright young girl living on Father's estate—the daughter of the impoverished baronet. She had such high hopes and dreams of earning a fortune to restore her parents to the life of comfort they'd enjoyed in their youth.

Such an idealistic young woman—and he'd fallen hopelessly in love with her.

What had befallen her since his abandonment? The determined look in her eyes spoke of past suffering. But she'd overcome it and emerged stronger than he could have believed. And she was stronger than he, for she'd worked hard to earn her position and had gained the respect of businessmen in a world where a woman's voice was too often ignored.

At length, she spoke. "Did you speak the truth earlier?"

"What truth?"

"That you'd do anything in your power to make me happy?"

He nodded. "I believe Fate has brought us together to give us a second chance."

"Us?"

"Me, then," he said.

"You think we can go back to what we were?" she asked.

"We can never go back," he replied. "We can only go forward. I spent nearly ten years believing you were dead and that I was responsible—maybe not directly, but I was responsible all the same. To see you alive again..." The words caught in his throat. "Sorry seems

such a trivial word—almost an insult compared to what I did to you. But I'm sorry, all the same—so sorry. Not only for your sake but for mine.”

“Yours?”

“I'm a selfish creature,” he said, “and a fool. All men are. But I'm not so foolish that I don't understand that you were the one woman to make me truly happy. I threw away that chance—all for my family's pride! When I saw you again, in Mrs. Dove-Lyon's parlor—you cannot believe what I felt. Ecstasy at seeing you alive again, then guilt—so much guilt, knowing you'd spent the last decade doing Lord knows what to survive, and...” he turned his head away, not wanting her to see the moisture in his eyes, “...and knowing that you most likely hated me, and deservedly so.”

He shook his head. “Forgive me, Lily. I have no right to continue to impose myself on you. I've caused you enough pain. Despite my assurances, I understand your unwillingness to risk your heart.”

“I am in the business of taking on risks, Lord Redstone,” she said.

“Financial risks perhaps,” he said, “the risks associated with some foolish man's ship and cargo—but what are all the ships in the world compared to your heart! And despite what you may say, you have a heart, Lily. I know it.”

They approached the end of the street and stopped. She bit her lip and glanced down a side street as if pondering a dilemma. Then she glanced at him, her clear gray eyes searching into his soul.

“You're wrong,” she said.

His heart sank.

Then her lips curled into a smile, and a glimmer of sympathy shone in her eyes.

“I *don't* hate you, Mason,” she said. “I could never hate you, no matter how hard I tried. And believe me, I tried.” She turned her head and looked out toward the docks, where the mast of a single ship broke the horizon behind the row of houses. “You were always there—in my heart—etched into my very soul.”

She sighed. “I've spent so many years using my head to make decisions that I've forgotten to use my heart. Mama always says...” she colored and broke off.

“Your mother's alive, still?”

“Yes,” she said. “Did you not read the marriage contract?”

“No.”

“Then you missed the clause stipulating your obligation not to criticize Mama,” she said. “The first rule of any business transaction is

that both parties must read the contract. You must learn that, if nothing else, if you are to succeed in your venture. You should count your blessings that Mr. Aldwych was not out to con you—or I, for that matter.”

“Which is why there was no question of my not signing,” he said. “*Either* contract. I only needed one thing to persuade me to sign Mrs. Dove-Lyon’s contract without needing to read the details.”

“Which was?”

“The identity of the bride,” he said. “I wasn’t going to let you go again—not when doing so the first time was the most monumental mistake of my life.” He gestured between them. “Does your mother know about—all this?”

She nodded. “I thought she’d disapprove of my plan, but she understood the practicalities...” She broke off, coloring.

“There’s no shame in a marriage of convenience,” he said. “You must understand the benefits of clarifying the obligations of both parties before signing any legal agreement.”

“But a marriage...” she said, “...I’d always intended to marry for love, not as a business arrangement. Isn’t the point of marriage that neither party knows what will befall them? They’re ruled by their hearts and don’t even consider what the benefits or the risks might be.”

“And the late Mr. Diamond?” he asked. “Was he of the same sentiment?”

She frowned, confusion in her expression.

“Your late husband?” he prompted. “Was your marriage an arrangement of convenience?”

“Oh.” She looked away, but not before he saw distress in her eyes.

Perhaps her first husband had not been kind to her. After all, husbands were not obliged to be kind. Mason only had to look at his poor stepmother to understand that.

After he’d arrived home to see Wilhelmina—the broken shell of a woman, so unlike the ice-cool debutante he’d abandoned—he’d almost offered for her out of sympathy. But she would never have accepted him—or any man.

Had he offered for Wilhelmina, he wouldn’t find himself betrothed to Lily. What further evidence did he need that Fate had reunited him with the woman he loved?

“Forgive me,” he said. “I’ll not speak of Mr. Diamond again if it distresses you. If we are betrothed, it wouldn’t do to live in the shadow of my predecessor.”

“And *are* we betrothed?”

“According to Mrs. Dove-Lyon, the newspapers—and that young clerk we just encountered, it would seem so,” he said. “Didn’t you set out to find a husband at the Lyon’s Den?”

“I suppose I did.”

“There were plenty that night worse than I,” he said. “Viscount De Blanchard seemed eager at the prospect of winning a bride.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That loathsome lecher,” she said. “He makes most women’s stomachs crawl at the mere sight of him. Yes—I’ll concede there was at least one member of the line-up that night who was, at least marginally, worse than yourself.”

He turned to face her and saw her smile, a devilish twinkle in her eyes.

“Ah!” he said. “You tease me. Is there hope for me after all? Should I perhaps display the tenacity you always valued so much and invite you to tea a second time in the hope you’ll accept?”

“Oh, very well,” she said. “As a matter of fact...”

They stopped outside a white-fronted terraced house.

“Perhaps you’d care to take tea at my home.”

“Would that be proper?” he asked.

“I fail to see why not,” she said. “We’re betrothed, are we not? And Mama can act as my chaperone.”

His stomach flipped. How could he face Lady de Villiers after what had befallen her at his hand? Was he about to be subjected to the wrath of an indignant mother?

It was no more than he deserved. And if he had to prostrate himself on the floor in front of her and grovel to beg forgiveness—then it was the least he could do to atone.

She gestured toward the house.

“You live *here*?” he asked.

“Is there something wrong with it?”

“It’s charming, but you’re a wealthy woman. I was expecting something larger.”

“We live within our means,” she said. “I have no need to display my fortune to the world. We’re comfortable and happy here. Mama keeps house for me, and I wouldn’t want to burden her with an overly large estate—for the sake of her health.”

“Is she ill?”

“Mama is a little frail, but we manage. We have an excellent doctor who sends someone daily to tend to her.”

She approached the front door of the house, which opened to reveal a liveried footman.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” he said. “We weren’t expecting you until later.”

“I know, John,” she said, handing him her gloves. “Do you know Lord Redstone?”

The footman bowed. “A pleasure, sir.”

Mason entered the hall. Though simply furnished, it exuded the kind of effortless elegance achieved by careful thought. Each item of décor had been placed to show the room to its greatest advantage. Tall, clean windows dominated the hall, through which the sunlight streamed, illuminating a tiled mosaic floor, which depicted a floral pattern. A pair of bone-white marble statuettes guarded the wide, sweeping staircase. He moved closer to inspect them. Both female forms—one wore a blindfold, holding a giant cornucopia, a horn-shaped basket filled with fruit and flowers. The other held a bow, a tall, regal-looking sighthound at her feet.

“Do you like them?”

He turned to see Lily watching him.

“Very much,” he said. “Italian marble, I take it? It looks as if a little piece of Rome has come to London.

“That was my intention,” she said. “Mama cannot visit Rome, so Rome has come to her, including the staircase guarded by Diana and Fortuna.”

Her lips curled into a mischievous grin. “Shall you dare to pass them by?”

“The goddess of the hunt and of good fortune? I think they should leave me alone.”

“You forget, Fortuna is the goddess of justice and fate, not just good fortune,” she said.

“Then I shall worship her as I pass,” he said, “for perhaps it was her hand which brought you to me.”

The footman gave a cough.

“Quite so,” Lily said. “Even John thinks your oversentimentality is not to be borne. Be careful Mason—for Diana swore never to marry and may yet counsel me to reject you.”

“Then you chose your goddesses wisely if they reside here to protect you,” he said.

“John,” she addressed the footman, “would you have Lizzie bring us some tea in the parlor?”

"Very good, madam." The footman disappeared through a side door, and Lily led Mason up the staircase. The mosaic pattern on the floor stretched up the stairs in a myriad of colors.

"Did you have the staircase brought over from Rome as well as the statues?" he asked.

She laughed. "Not the staircase, but the man who designed it. Mama recommended him."

"Your mother has good taste," he said. "Is she fond of Rome?"

"She visited Rome with Papa several times before he died," she replied. "She had a love affair with Rome as much as she had with Papa, and I promised her that as soon as I could afford to, we'd spend a vacation in Rome. But it was not to be."

"Why not?" he asked. "Surely you can afford it now."

"Her illness prevented it," she said. "Though she's much recovered now, she has no wish to return. She once said she wanted to spend her final years within sight of the Trevi fountain, so she could dance among the waters every sunrise. But London is her home now, and she wouldn't be parted from her..." she glanced at him, "...her grandchildren."

Dancing in the Trevi fountain...

Where had he heard that expression before?

Dear Lord! It was what Hart had said about a courtesan.

And not any courtesan—the infamous La Flamme—the woman who'd fucked a fortune out of Mason's father.



Chapter Nine

Lily gestured to a wing-backed chair beside the fireplace, and her companion sat while they waited for Lizzie to arrive with the tea.

He seemed to have transformed while they ascended the staircase. Outwardly he was all politeness, displaying the gallantry he'd shown on the walk from the Royal Exchange, but she recognized the subtle differences—just as she had that day when he'd abandoned her. His expression had hardened—not by much, but enough to send a shiver through her, as if an invisible wall had formed between them.

Was it the mention of her children? Did he just want a rich wife to service his debts—and his body—without the burden of children?

What would he say when she told him they were his?

After a brief period of awkward silence, Lily heard Lizzie approach, together with another, familiar tread—a shuffle, accompanied by the clack of Mama's walking stick.

He rose to his feet as the door opened, then stepped aside to make room for Lizzie as she placed the tray on the table. Lizzie glanced at him, and her face turned pink, then she bobbed a curtsey and fled, clearly overcome by his smile—which could melt every woman's heart—and those devilish handsome looks...

Lily drew in a sharp breath, admonishing herself. She was no longer the giddy girl to be taken advantage of.

He glanced in her direction, and his lip curled upward in that familiar cocky grin. He was still one of the handsomest men in London. And, by the devil, he knew it.

Then he glanced toward the door, and his smile disappeared. The color drained from his cheeks, and the easy confidence was replaced by another emotion.

Compassion.

“Lady De Villiers!” he cried, his voice a little too bright. “What a pleasure to see you again after all these years.”

Mama stood in the doorway. Lily let her gaze drift over Mama’s pale form, seeing her through the eyes of a newcomer.

Her own vision was clouded by the love she bore her mother and the years of becoming accustomed to Mama’s illness, such that she was now blind to it. She saw her beloved parent—the vibrant creature who, through sheer strength of will, had put food on the table and provided Lily with an education to be proud of and a means to lift them out of poverty and despair.

But, as she looked with unbiased eyes, she saw the fragile invalid—a woman unable to walk unaided, who stood, bent and broken in the doorway, her gown soiled with the remnants of luncheon—all the more laughable for its elegance.

A creature most would be ashamed of and hide away—never to be seen in polite society.

“Lord Redstone,” Mama said. She straightened her stance as much as she was able, and Lily glanced at Mason.

If he expected her to be ashamed of Mama, then she’d be glad to disappoint him. Swelled by defiance, ready to defend Mama against his derision, she stood and glared at him, challenging him to laugh.

In fact, she hoped he would—then she could smack that arrogant smirk off his expression with the aid of a large candlestick—the very candlestick which was within her reach on the mantel shelf...

Mama’s eyes widened, and she stepped forward. Her body listed to one side, as if she were about to faint.

Before Lily could move, Mason was upon her. One hand cupping her elbow, his broad frame surrounding her own, he steered Mama into the room.

“My good lady,” he said, smiling. “I would not have it known that my presence was so unpalatable as to make you faint in disgust. Come—let me help get you seated. The chair by the fireplace is most appropriate—and is far too comfortable for an old soldier such as myself.”

“And where shall *you* sit, Lord Redstone?” Mama asked. “By my feet?”

“Of course not!” he laughed. “I shall serve tea.”

“Is that not rather unseemly for a gentleman?” Lily asked, wincing at the sharpness in her own voice.

“I served tea several times at Waterloo,” he replied. “It’s a poor man

who waits for others to make his tea in the midst of battle. If I learned anything in my time in the militia, it was the need for self-sufficiency.” He leaned toward Mama, giving her a conspiratorial wink, “And, of course, how to shout unbelievably loud to a troop of men.”

Mama’s eyes glittered with mirth.

Was she so easily charmed?

“I can well believe that,” Lily said. “Most men get by in the world with nothing more than a loud voice—a little like a speaking-trumpet. Excellent for magnifying the voice, but an empty instrument nonetheless.”

“I fear your daughter is immune to my charms,” Mason said.

“And well, she might be,” Mama said, her smile disappearing. Her eyes flashed, and her expression showed a little of her mettle—an echo of the Lady Francesca De Villiers, who had once ruled a large estate before her husband had gambled away their fortune.

“I would like to know what your intentions are toward my daughter, Lord Redstone.”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the next, in the manner of a schoolboy caught with his hand in the sweetmeats and standing before his housemaster. Lily found herself smiling at his discomfort.

“I intend to marry her, Lady De Villiers.”

“Is that so?” Mama continued. “The last time a gentleman spoke of matrimony, my daughter found herself abandoned—and evicted from her home. It would be fitting if *I* were to evict *you*, to restore the balance, would it not?”

“Forgive me,” he stammered, “I...”

“I always thought you were a good sort of boy,” Mama continued. “My Lily was terribly taken with you. I had hoped you’d turn out to be a better man—but it was not to be.”

“Mama!” Lily exclaimed. Though she took satisfaction from seeing his discomfort, she took little pleasure from seeing it inflicted by others—as opposed to being inflicted by herself.

What did that make her? A vengeful shrew? A woman whose pride had been hurt?

“I’m only trying to establish whether Lord Redstone intends to act honorably toward you this time,” Mama said. “If he’s worthy of you, he’ll not object to a little questioning. My dear friend always claims to have an eye for a good match for her clients—and she’s made several. I’m only trying to establish whether she has succeeded with the one client of hers I give a damn for—my own daughter.”

Mason flinched at Mama's profanity. "Are you saying you're acquainted with Mrs. Dove-Lyon?" he asked.

"We're old friends," Mama said.

"Then you must tell me more of her. She's quite an enigma."

"And she prefers to remain so, Lord Redstone. She values discretion—as do I. But I'll concede that she has an eye for making perfect matches—even when those matches seem, at first, decidedly unlikely to succeed."

"Then perhaps you should have faith in your friend's eye for a good match," he said.

"It is *you* we need to have faith in," Mama said. "If I may be blunt—do you truly intend to marry my daughter?"

He glanced at Lily, and for a moment, his eyes grew dark, focusing on her as if she were the only creature in the world. Her breath caught at the depth of expression in his eyes, as if she were standing in front of a great fire that would engulf her at any moment.

Her own body warmed at the intensity in his eyes. He lowered his gaze to her bodice, and his nostrils flared as if he were undressing her with his eyes. Heat bloomed deep inside her, and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. His tongue flicked out, wetting his lips until they glistened as he raked his gaze over her body as if he were feeling every curve of her flesh.

How could he affect her so deeply with just a single look?

Then he lifted his attention once more, and she was met with the full force of his expression—his blue eyes dark with lust, like a deep ocean waiting to claim her.

And to her shame, she wanted to be claimed—to feel him inside her once more, teasing, caressing—waiting for her surrender, before marking her as his...

He blinked slowly, then resumed his attention on Mama.

"I have every intention of honoring the contract I have signed."

"A little cold-hearted, but I suppose it'll have to do," Mama said. "We have all learned the bitter lesson that every relationship—whether founded on the strength of a business acquaintance or an attraction to the opposite sex—benefits from the signing of a contract before the goods exchange hands."

Lily smiled to herself. Mama seemed to have recovered much of her spirit. If nothing else, then, Mason had provided her mother with an adversary to focus her ferocity on.

Then Mama ruined it all by winking at him—she actually *winked*!

His face, which had shown trepidation, broke into a smile—that disarming smile which had addled Lily’s wits and claimed her heart.

Then Mama leaned forward in an effort to get comfortable.

“Allow me,” he said, reaching behind Mama for a cushion. He plumped it up and placed it behind her, and she leaned back and sighed. Then he glanced about him and reached for the blanket in the basket on the floor, which Lizzie had neatly folded only that morning, and placed it over Mama’s legs.

“Is that better, Lady De Villiers?” he asked.

“A little.”

“Let me fetch you some tea,” he said. “A little milk and no sugar, if I remember right?”

Mama smiled and nodded, and Lily bristled with irritation.

Treacherous Mama! Would she fall so easily for his charms? The whole world knew that most ladies took their tea with just a little milk. He should not be commended for making a lucky guess.

“Do you remember how *I* take my tea, Lord Redstone?” she asked.

He shifted his gaze to the left as if remembering—or was that the direction someone looked when they were formulating a falsehood? Then he nodded and smiled.

“You take no milk in your tea, for you prefer the sharp taste which keeps you refreshed,” he said. “You’re partial to a slice of lemon, dropped directly into the cup, rather than in the pot, to ensure the bitterness of the rind doesn’t mar the taste. And, depending on where the tea originates from, you stir in up to half a teaspoon of honey to take the edge off the bitter taste of the tea.” He gestured toward the tea tray. “May I oblige you with a cup?”

“I can help myself,” Lily said.

“Then I shall serve your mother while you see about your own tea.”

“Mama’s not a burden,” she said.

“Quite so,” he replied. “Your mother is a lady, and it is my pleasure to help.”

“I can see to her tea,” Lily said. “She doesn’t need you.”

“*She* is still in the room, Lily-Marie,” Mama said. “It seems as if my daughter is giving you a hard time, Lord Redstone.”

“Aye, she is.”

“It’s no more than you deserve,” Mama continued.

“In that, we are agreed,” he said. He poured a cup and handed it to Mama. She took it, her hand shaking.

“Are you quite well, Lady De Villiers?” he asked.

"I'm afraid I'm not what I once was," Mama said. "I had a seizure some years ago. To my good fortune, my Lily-Marie found me before it was too late. She fought like a lioness to find a doctor to help me, rather than one who just dismissed me. I still struggle with my left side, but my precious girl spent a year helping me to walk again."

"She's a remarkable woman," Mason said, glancing at Lily.

"That she is." Mama set her cup aside and offered Mason her hand. He took it, and she pulled him closer.

"She's my child, Lord Redstone," she said. "A mother will do everything necessary for her children, will she not?"

He glanced at Lily, then nodded. "I understand."

"Then you understand that if you are to be worthy of my Lily, then you must also be worthy of Belinda and Amelia. They are the reason my daughter applied to Mrs. Lyon—to give those girls a father—and a father's name."

"I understand," he said.

"Then I only have one more thing to say," Mama added.

"Which is?"

"You broke her heart."

"Mama..." Lily pleaded, but Mama ignored her, focusing her attention on Mason.

"I know," he said, "and a day doesn't go by that I don't regret my actions. I believe I have been given a chance, not only to atone but to seek the happiness which had eluded me ever since that day. I can do no more than place myself at your mercy and beg forgiveness for the hurt I caused."

"And you will do everything in your power to ensure my daughter's happiness?"

"Aye," he said, his voice hoarse. "I will. Let me be struck down if I do anything to cause your daughter harm. I now live for one thing, and one thing only—for the chance to love your daughter as I was meant to love her—freely and unhampered by pride."

Mama raised an eyebrow, picked up her teacup, and took a sip. Then she glanced over at Lily and winked—again.

Really! Mama was becoming quite incorrigible!

"Very well, Lord Redstone," Mama said. "That all seems in order. Of course, I shall hold you to your promise. I may be weak in body, but you will not want to be within fifty miles of me if you break my faith in you."

She gestured to the place beside Lily on the chaise longue.

“Please sit,” she said with a huff. “You’re making the place look untidy.”

He approached Lily, and they exchanged a smile. Perhaps if he were prepared to weather Mama’s scrutiny, he’d earned a second chance.

A clatter of footsteps echoed outside, followed by excited voices. The door flew open, and Belinda and Amelia burst into the room.

“Mama! Grandmama!”

“We knew you were here!”

“You should see what we’ve been doing—oh!”

They cried out in unison, recoiling as they spotted the tall, silent figure sitting next to Lily.

“Who are you?” Belinda cried, always the bolder of the two.

“Don’t be a simpleton, Billie!” Amelia said. “You know who he is. Grandmama told us. Remember?”

Lily glanced at Mama, her heart hammering in her chest. Surely she didn’t tell them...

Belinda laughed. “Of course!” she cried. “You’re our papa, aren’t you?”



Chapter Ten

“Belinda!”

The woman beside Mason stiffened and gave a small cry.

The young girl who’d spoken turned a bright shade of pink. Her sister—identical in every respect, save for her hair being in a neater style and adorned with pink ribbons—gave her a sharp nudge.

“Billie, I *told* you not to be so forward!”

They stood before him and stared with a direct frankness not often found among young ladies—but then, most young ladies of his acquaintance had been schooled into submission by their overbearing mamas in a quest to make them desirable on the marriage mart.

Neither of the two little harridans standing before him looked as if they’d submit to anyone.

“Welcome, sir,” they said in unison.

With a riot of glossy dark curls and clear gray eyes, they were the image of their mother. The one who’d spoken—who, on closer observation, had eyes which were slightly darker in shade—took a step forward, a bold, determined set to her chin.

“Are you the man Mama has found to become our papa?” She cocked her head to one side, then glanced at Lily.

“He looks very well, Mama. As long as he’s kind, I think I shall approve of him.”

Mason couldn’t help smiling. With their sunny dispositions and wide smiles, these two children would light up any room they entered.

Next to him, Lily seemed to relax, as if she’d been holding her breath. Perhaps she’d been expecting her children to dislike him on sight—or for him to dislike them.

The girl curtsayed again. “I’m Belinda Beatrice Diamond,” she said. “Otherwise known as Billie—to my friends.” Now it was her turn to

nudge her sister, who followed suit.

“Amelia Millicent Diamond.”

Belinda wrinkled her nose. “Otherwise known as Little Miss Pink Ribbon.”

Amelia stuck out her bottom lip.

“Belinda!” Lily warned. “Not in front of a guest.”

“Did not you say, Mama, that he should take us as he found us?”

“That’s no excuse for incivility,” Lily said, laughter in her tone.

They dipped into another curtsy, pulling their skirts wide as if they were being presented at court. “Pleased to meet you, sir,” they said again in unison.

“What do you think of him, Millie?” Belinda said.

“He’s very handsome.”

Belinda gave a snort. “Looks aren’t everything you know,” she said. “But I daresay you think he’d look better with a pink ribbon. Won’t you lend him one?”

“Girls!” Lady De Villiers exclaimed. “Must you embarrass our guest so? To say nothing of your poor mama.”

“Sorry, grandmama,” Belinda said. She skipped over to the breakfast table. “Shall I pour you some more tea?”

“No, *toppolina*. Come and sit beside me.”

The child drew up a footstool next to her grandmother’s chair and sat on it. She leaned against Lady De Villiers, placing her head in her grandmother’s lap, and gazed up at her with a look of adoration that sent a small pulse through Mason’s heart.

Is this what his family pride had cost him? The love of a child—a loving family who teased each other but looked out for each other, united against the world?

He smiled at the little scene, then resumed his attention on Lily. She watched her mother and her daughter with an odd expression on her face—love, mixed with a little guilt—then she nodded toward her other daughter.

“Millie dear, would you ask Lizzie to bring us more tea? And perhaps help her with it?”

“May we have some of her fruitcake?”

“Of course,” Lily said. “Perhaps our guest would like some, too. Lord Redstone?”

Mason nodded. “I should love that.”

“We’ll need plates as well,” Lily added.

“Yes, Mama.” Amelia curtsied again, then exited the room. Shortly

after, she returned with a tray laden with a fruitcake and a small pile of plates. She set the tray on the breakfast table and began slicing the cake.

"Your daughters are charming," he whispered. "Do they often help the servants?"

Lily's smile slipped. "Why should they not?" she asked. "It does them good to understand how a house may be run. I would not have them idle and indulged."

"No child of yours could ever be idle," he said. "But indulged—where such an indulgence stems from the affection of a true parent..." He shook his head. "How I envy you!"

She colored and looked away.

"Ahem."

Lady de Villiers gave a little cough, and Lily exchanged a pointed glance with her mother. Both women stiffened, and the atmosphere shifted as if something unsaid was about to be declared.

Belinda, sitting at her grandmother's feet, spoke up, keen, intelligent eyes focusing on Mason.

"Are you to be our papa?" she demanded.

"If your mother will have me," he replied, "and if you deem me fit to fulfill the role."

"Are you suited?" she asked. "I must ask you what qualities you possess. Isn't that right, Mama?"

"Belinda..." Lily warned.

"That's what you always say when conducting an interview for a new employee or policyholder," Belinda continued. "You must consider whether the potential reward merits the risk undertaken."

Whether the potential reward merits the risk undertaken? Ye gods—the child was how old? Ten?

"I see you have a prodigy for a daughter, Mrs. Diamond," Mason said.

"If you're to marry Mama, you should call her Lily—or 'my dear.'" Belinda said. "Not Mrs. Diamond."

"And precocious with it," he added.

Lily smiled, a flash of pride in her expression.

"I like the idea of choosing my papa," Belinda said.

"You do?" Mason asked. "But what about your real..."

He stopped as he heard a gasp coming from the woman beside him. Distress lined Lily's features, and he placed his hand over hers.

How could he have been so thoughtless? Here he was, wishing himself on this family, yet they had a father of their own—Mr. Diamond

—a father who had died.

“My apologies,” he whispered.

She shook her head and removed her hand. The matriarch sitting across the room stared at him, taking everything in.

Belinda, seemingly unaware of her mother’s distress, continued. “You hear of *children* being chosen,” she said. “Mr. and Mrs. McLaskey adopted an orphaned little boy last year.” She turned her gray gaze to Mason. “Are you an orphan?”

“I suppose I am,” he said.

Parentless—and childless.

Amelia approached him and held out a piece of cake on a plate. “We’ll look after you,” she said. “Mama always says we must take care of those less fortunate.”

“Did you want to be chosen?” Belinda asked. Her expression was unsettling—the color of her eyes was her mother’s, but there was something familiar about their shape, a strange intensity which spoke to him, though he couldn’t quite place it. She must take after her father in that respect.

“Yes, I believe I did, Miss Belinda,” he said.

“Mrs. Lyon is never wrong with her choice,” Lady De Villiers spoke up, while she continued to stroke her granddaughter’s hair. Once again, he was struck by how frail she looked. Her body, which had once been statuesque and elegant, was thin and delicate. She looked as if she might snap in two at any moment, and there was something wrong with the left side of her body. The skin of her face looked as if it had been pulled down, and he couldn’t help noticing the distorted shape of her left hand and the way she struggled with her teacup.

Neither could he help notice how her granddaughters tended to her. After handing him a slice of cake, Amelia offered one to Lady de Villiers, but not before she’d cut it into bite-sized pieces to enable her grandmother to eat it without assistance. Lady de Villiers was a proud woman, but it was not the sort of pride that broke hearts and ruined lives—it was a wish to sustain her dignity and to be treated as a worthwhile human being in a world where the slightest flaw was frowned upon and ridiculed.

There was no way she could be La Flamme.

“Are you going to tell us about yourself?” Belinda asked, “So we can decide whether we want you?”

A snort came from beside him, and he glanced at Lily, who was trying—and failing—to hide her smile.

"I'm an earl," he said. Neither child looked impressed.

"I'm also a soldier."

"Oh, a soldier!" Amelia cried. "Does that mean you're brave?"

"It means I can wield a sword and can order others about."

"Did you fight any battles?" Belinda asked, eagerness in her eyes. "I'd love to wield a sword!"

"It's not so glamorous, Miss Belinda," he replied, "and not particularly brave."

"You fought at Waterloo, did you not—in the ninety-fifth regiment?" Lady de Villiers spoke.

Lily drew in a sharp breath, concern in her gray eyes. "Dear Lord, Mason," she whispered, "were you injured?"

"A few scrapes, that's all," he said.

"And now?"

"And now I've returned to restore my estate."

"Your estate!" Belinda exclaimed. "Do you have a house in the country? We've asked Mama to take us to the country, but she hasn't."

"Then you must all come and visit Redstone Manor," Mason said. "You'd love it—it's near Brighton, and we could go sea-bathing."

"Sea-bathing!" the girls exclaimed in unison. Was it a quality twins possessed—the ability to say exactly the same thing at the same time? One would almost have believed they were related to faeries. Perhaps that was why their look unsettled him—that strange familiarity he couldn't quite place.

"Mama keeps saying she'll take us on a trip."

"Belinda!" Lily admonished.

"The child's right, though," Lady de Villiers interjected. "You should take more time for yourself, Lily-Marie. You work too hard. Mr. Settle can manage the business."

"Can Mr. Waterman spare her?" Mason asked.

"No," Lily said curtly.

"Mr. Settle can manage," Lady de Villiers said again. "You must wish to set eyes on Redstone once more, Lily-Marie—it was always such a beautiful place, and you loved it so much!"

Her words ignited a flare of guilt inside Mason's heart. Because of him and his family's damned pride, Lily and her mother had been torn from the home they'd loved.

"You've been there before?" Amelia asked.

Lily colored. "Yes," she said. "It's very beautiful."

"That's settled then," Mason said.

"I don't know..." Lily began, but he interrupted her.

"But *I* do. Please say yes."

She glanced at him, and her eyes sparkled with the connection they shared—memories of a happier childhood when they used to race around the estate together—long, hot summers playing as friends—the second son of the earl and the only daughter of the impoverished baronet living in a grace-and-favor cottage—until, inevitably, they'd fallen in love...

He placed his hand over hers and caressed her skin.

"A second chance," he whispered.

Her chest rose and fell in a sigh, then the corners of her mouth lifted into a smile.

"Very well," she said. "A second chance, yes?"

"Excellent!" Lady de Villiers cried. "And you needn't worry about me—I can take care of myself."

"Oh no, you don't," Mason said. "You're coming, too. I hear sea-bathing can be very beneficial for a lady's health. And, after all, we are to be a family, are we not?"

Once again, mother and daughter exchanged glances. Lady de Villiers frowned at Lily, then nodded.

"We'd be delighted."

It seemed as if he had a champion in Lady de Villiers—the last person he'd expected to be on his side.

After finishing her cake, Belinda fidgeted in her seat while the adults talked, then she spoke.

"Lord Redstone—or should I call you Papa?"

"I'm not your papa, yet," he laughed. "I'm merely a reprobate who needs to convince your mama I'm worthy of her—and of you, of course."

"Lord Redstone it is, then," Belinda said. "Would you like to see our experiment?"

"Not now, Belinda," Lily said.

"Won't he understand it, Mama?"

Amelia giggled. "Even Mr. Settle struggles to understand it, and grandmama doesn't understand it at all."

"Are you conducting scientific experiments?" he asked. "Where?"

"In our schoolroom!"

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"We're experimenting with dice," Belinda said.

Mason shook his head. There was little someone could do with dice

except toss them on a table in a gaming hell and lose a fortune. Surely Lily wasn't training her daughters in the art of gaming?

"We've been testing a theory first presented by Monsieur Laplace," Belinda continued. "The Central Limit Theorem."

What the bloody hell was the *Central Limit Theorem*?

Amelia nudged her sister. "He doesn't know what that is, you silly goose."

"And you do?" he challenged.

"Of course," Belinda said. "It says that we can make accurate predictions based on what we've seen in the past, provided we have enough information."

"That sounds like witchcraft," Mason said. Belinda creased her face into a frown, and for a moment, he experienced a jolt of recognition, as if Father were looking at him. Then she blinked, and the expression was gone.

"Anyone too primitive to understand science and mathematics would call it witchcraft," the girl continued. "Gunpowder, for instance, would be considered the work of the devil by a medieval knight or a chimpanzee."

"Belinda! You insult our guest," Lady de Villiers said.

"No—no!" Mason laughed. "I find it rather refreshing to encounter someone not afraid to speak her mind."

"Let *me* explain," Amelia said. "I can at least do it without being condescending. The theorem centers around the observation of patterns. Billie and I have been throwing a set of six dice and making a note of the totals each time in order to predict how many times we'd expect to get different totals. We've been drawing up a chart which helps us to make our predictions."

"That sounds interesting," Mason said.

And somewhat pointless—but he wasn't going to hurt their feelings by voicing his true opinion.

Belinda, however, watched him with a shrewdness not often found in one so young.

"It's not some silly bit of fun," she said. "Mama's tutor was a protégée of Monsieur Laplace. We have a copy of *Théorie Analytique des Probabilités*. Would you like to see it?"

He glanced at Lily, pleading for help with his eyes, but she shook her head and laughed.

"If you wish to win my daughters' approval, Mason, then you must understand the laws of probability."

“Why the devil would *I* want to understand the laws of probability?” he asked.

“This particular law has been of great assistance in my business,” she said. “And I daresay the man who understands it has an advantage at the gaming tables over one who doesn’t—though not, of course, if Mrs. Lyon is there to stack the odds in her favor with an extra-strong dose of laudanum.”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and he caught a flash of the vibrant young girl he’d fallen in love with.

“And you wish me to become acquainted with it?” he asked.

“If you do, it would place you in a favorable light when I decide whether to proceed with our union,” she said, “and it would make me more amenable to accepting your invitation to Redstone.”

“Then, your wish is my command,” he said.

He rose to his feet and let the twins lead him out of the room. If he had to learn about probabilities and random numbers in order to win the approval of these charming girls and secure Lily’s hand in marriage, then he’d read the most tedious journals in all of England.



Chapter Eleven

Lily breathed in the warm summer air and smiled. The breeze carried with it the faint tang of the sea—not the odors of the London docks, but the fresher, clearer aroma of salt and sand—an aroma which evoked memories of a childhood playing in the sea on the Sussex coast.

The smell of home.

She tipped her face upward, letting the dappled sunlight warm her face, and closed her eyes, relishing the pink glow through her eyelids.

Had it really been ten years since she'd last set foot in Redstone woods?

A hand touched her elbow.

"Lily? Are you well?"

She nodded and opened her eyes.

He stood beside her, his eyes almost glowing in the sunlight—a blue to match the summer sky.

"Perhaps you should have rested after luncheon with your mother and the girls."

No," she said, "I couldn't rest until I came here again."

Earlier that morning, they'd arrived at Redstone Manor, in Mason's carriage. Lily had forgotten what uncomfortable things carriages were, having become used to walking everywhere in London. The confined space and swaying motion, together with the continual, excited chatter of Belinda and Amelia, had brought about a headache, which only fresh air and solitude could remedy.

Rather than give her the peace she craved, Mason had insisted upon accompanying her on a tour of the grounds, and, to her surprise, she took more comfort from his silent companionship than she ever could from being alone.

Her bitterness at his betrayal was being eroded piece by piece, as if

she were formed of a marble block and he was a sculptor, chipping away at the unwanted pieces to reveal the woman within.

Curse him—he always seemed to know exactly the right thing to do—and to say.

And he always seemed to anticipate what she needed the most. Mama and the girls had already fallen under his spell, and now, as they walked through the woods together—the woods in which they'd played as children—she found herself succumbing.

“Perhaps I should have remained at the main house,” she said, “if only to pay my respects to the Lady Wilhelmina.”

He shook his head. “My stepmother dislikes company. She rarely ventures out of the east wing. I doubt you’ll see her.”

“Nevertheless, she is, for all intents and purpose, our hostess. And, if we are to proceed with...” she gestured between them, “...this marriage, then she and I will be related.”

“Trust me, she’s best left alone,” he said. “Poor lady—I know not what to do for her. She’s beyond my aid, yet she’s my responsibility, and I blame myself.”

He looked so stricken that she reached for his hand.

“There’s still hope for her,” she said. “There is always hope.”

“You believe that?”

“It’s what kept us going—Mama and I.”

He sighed. “I’m so sorry, Lily,” he said. “I ruined so many lives with my actions. I can only hope to earn your forgiveness one day.”

He curled his fingers round hers and smiled. “Come. I have a surprise for you.”

He led her further along the path until the trees thinned out into a clearing to reveal a small two-story cottage. The front door, painted a pale green, was framed with a climbing rose in full bloom, shades of hot pink vibrating against glossy blue-green leaves.

“Sweet Lord!” Lily exclaimed. “I’d forgotten how beautiful it was!”

He led her toward the cottage and pushed open the door.

She blinked, adjusting her eyes to the dark of the hallway. Silently, he led her through the cottage, room by room, until they reached the kitchen. The sunlight streamed through the windows, picking up dust motes and illuminating the iron range, which was cold with neglect.

“Does nobody live here?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Not since...” He broke off, and she withdrew her hand, moving through each room until she reached the staircase.

She climbed the stairs and turned at the top, her footsteps echoing

against the floorboards until she reached the once-familiar door. She pushed it open and entered her old bedchamber.

Sparsely furnished, it had a small bed at the far end, covered in a dust sheet, and a table beside the window containing a vase of long-dead flowers silhouetted against the light.

"Is it as you remember?" he asked.

"It looks smaller," she said. She glanced across the room. "The crack in my window is still there!"

"Do you remember how it happened?"

She nodded. "I tried to throw a ball out of the window and hit the glass instead. Papa was furious—he made me go to bed without any supper for a week."

"If I recall, it was only two days," Mason said, "then he relented." The boyish smile he wore belied his age, and she could almost believe she was her ten-year-old self once more, scrambling up walls and trees, playing with the boy she'd worshipped.

"All I remember is thinking I would have starved to death had you not saved me," she said.

He laughed softly. "It was Mrs. Biggins's cake that saved you."

She smiled at the memory of him below her window, brandishing a fruitcake he'd stolen from the kitchen at Redstone Manor.

"Papa gave me a thrashing for that cake, you know," he said. "It was meant for our houseguests—the Duke and Duchess of Bowborough if I recall. The duchess had a particularly sweet tooth."

"You remember all that?" she asked.

He grinned. "I also remember how sore my seat was after he thrashed me. I couldn't sit down at all the next day."

"You never told me that!" she exclaimed.

"Why would I?" he asked. "You'd only have done something ridiculously noble like tell Father *you'd* stolen it. I would gladly have taken all the punishments in the world to ensure you didn't suffer."

His voice caught.

"Forgive me, Lily," he said. "All my life, I believed myself to be honorable, yet one lapse in judgment on my part caused such misery! It pains me to look upon this cottage knowing what happened to you—knowing that Father tossed you out. I haven't looked upon it for ten years. I had thought of having it torn down."

"Then why didn't you?" she asked. "Why come here now?"

"Because I knew it held happy memories for you, and some of my happiest memories," he said. "One, in particular."

She moved toward the window. The wooden frame had suffered over the years, the tell-tale holes like tiny pinpricks, evidence of woodworm. But she found what she was looking for—two sets of initials, carved into the wood.

MR & LdeV.

She traced the letters, and the heart she'd carved to frame them, then winced at a spike of pain. A small red droplet swelled on her fingertip.

"Allow me," he said.

A warm hand clasped hers, and he deftly plucked a splinter from her finger. Then he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed each of her fingers, finishing with her forefinger, which he caressed with his tongue.

How could such a simple act feel so intimate? She flushed as her skin tightened at his touch, memories of shared intimacy sending a deep pulse of need through her body.

"Mason..."

"Oh, Lily," he whispered. "Too many years have passed."

"I've missed Redstone Cottage," she said quietly.

"And it has missed you," he replied. "*Everything* here has missed you."

He placed her hand over his heart.

"I've missed you," he whispered. "The last time we were in this room was the single happiest moment of my life."

She glanced toward the bed, the memory of their lovemaking so vivid that she could almost see them—two souls, expressing their love with their bodies—her naked form, open and trusting, legs parted in invitation while he slid inside her. She could almost hear their cries—her sharp intake of breath as he breached her maidenhead, followed by his whispers of reassurance, until, finally, they came together, crying each other's names as her body shattered around him.

After he'd left, she had carved their initials into the windowsill to mark the day she finally understood what it was to truly love another.

Then, the day after, he'd turned up at the cottage, his expression a mixture of pain and pride, to tell her that he'd forsaken her, that his brother had died, and he was marrying an heiress to maintain the family line. That very afternoon, the old earl had arrived with his steward and three footmen and turned Lily and Mama out of the cottage.

"No!" He cried. He drew her to him. "No, my sweet flower, you mustn't dwell on what happened afterward. Cherish the sweet memories, not the bitter. And let us make new ones. Let us bring love back to Redstone."

She shook her head. "Mason, I..."

"Don't you deserve to be loved?" he whispered. "I love you, Lily. I have always loved you. I know you must hate me for what I did, but my love for you has never changed. When I lay in the battlefield at Waterloo, it was you I thought of. When I thought you had died, it gave me strength—it made me realize that there was no shame in dying in battle—and that if I fell, I would be reunited with you and would have a chance to atone in the afterlife, to show you how much I loved you..."

He broke off, his body shaking, as he held her against his chest. She closed her eyes and clung to him, overpowered by the soft scent of sandalwood, which always reminded her of him.

"I count myself so blessed," he said, his voice cracking, "to have the chance to atone here on earth."

He held her at arm's length and studied her, his gaze wandering over her body.

"You were an angel then," he said, "my precious flower. My Lily. But now..." He shook his head, as if in disbelief, his nostrils flaring as he inhaled. "Now, you're the most remarkable woman. Strong, capable, a mother, a businesswoman. Independent, yet vulnerable. You are the light to my darkness, the one woman who could ever make me believe it is possible to love again.

He drew her to him and brushed his lips against her mouth, his breath warm against her skin.

"Will you take me as I am, dearest Lily?"

"Mason..." She tilted her head until their lips met.

With a groan of need, he claimed her mouth, his lips sliding over hers, his tongue probing, begging entry. She parted her lips, and he claimed her, devouring her mouth, his tongue moving slickly, claiming every corner. His body hard and ready, he moved back and drew her to the bed, and her body pulsed with anticipation and the thrill of the long-ago memory.

"Oh, Lily," he said, "you don't know how much I've longed for this."

He reached for her skirts, his fingers fumbling beneath her petticoats, and she shifted her thighs, then cried out as she felt his hands on her bare skin—the calloused hands of the seasoned soldier sending pleasurable sensations through her. A deep ache pulsed in her center, and a whimper escaped her lips.

"That's it, my Lily," he whispered. "Does your body remember the feel of me inside you?"

Need overcame shame at her wantonness, and she parted her thighs,

tilting her hips toward him, urging him on.

“Do you want me, Lily?”

She nodded.

“Tell me,” he demanded, his voice growing hoarse. “I must hear it, for I fear I’ll not be gentle.”

His body shook with barely restrained need.

“I want you, Mason,” she said. “I want you inside me.”

He clawed at the folds of her dress and moved back, losing his balance, and they fell onto the bed. She sighed at the deliciousness of his weight on top of her. How long had she waited to be claimed—to surrender to pleasure, so utterly and completely? She’d spent the last ten years taking responsibility for herself and for others. But now, she would find sweet release in yielding to another.

“Mason!” she cried, urgency in her voice.

His breath came in heavy rasps as he fumbled with his breeches.

Then, with a swift, urgent thrust, he claimed her. She let out a cry as he speared her, taking what she’d offered. The pinch of pain faded as her body stretched to accommodate him, as if it remembered the delicious pleasures he could give her. He let out a sigh, then grew still, his heart hammering against her chest.

Then he moved—slowly at first, shifting almost imperceptibly inside her, to a gentle rhythm, until each movement reflected in her own body like ripples in a lake, sending waves of pleasure through her. Pleasure flared inside her, igniting a fire in her blood which coursed through her body.

A deep groan rattled in his chest.

“My lord,” he whispered, “you’re as sweet as I remember.”

She clung to him, relishing the ripples of pleasure in her body.

Then he shifted position, and she cried out as the pleasure intensified until it bordered on pain. He withdrew once more, then slammed into her, his frantic, eager thrusting increasing the pace until the wave of pleasure crested higher and higher.

He let out a cry.

Then her body exploded as the wave crashed around her. The world shattered into a thousand shards, sending a myriad of bright lights across her mind. With a roar, he surged forward, and her body shattered a second time, sending her spiraling into the sky. Their twin cries echoed through the air, and he collapsed on top of her, his body shaking, while he continued to thrust weakly.

As she returned to the solid world, she opened her eyes. Still inside

her, he lay on top of her, eyes closed, a single tear beading on his lashes.

"My flower," he whispered, almost as if to himself. His heartbeat slowed, and his breathing grew steady. Reaching up, she buried her hands in his hair and caressed his locks. A slow, sleepy smile curved on his lips, and he nestled his head on her chest.

His expression displayed a vulnerability she hadn't seen before, which tore at her soul, and needled at her conscience. At heart, he was a good man—the best of men. He'd been driven by a momentary act of weakness, succumbing to the whims of a bullying father and the pride associated with an old family name.

But the man who lay in her bed now was not the earl nor the soldier.

He was just a man—a man in love, asking for forgiveness and a second chance.

And everyone deserved a second chance.

He opened his eyes, and she was assaulted by their intensity.

"I love you, Lily," he said. "I always have."

"And I, you."

A flare of hope swelled within his eyes, and he smiled. "Then, you might bring yourself to marry me?"

She nodded.

He kissed her, then withdrew, and cool air brushed over her thighs.

She swallowed the sense of loss as he sat up and buttoned his breeches. Then he caressed her leg. Her cheeks warmed with shame at his frank appraisal of her body, and she tried to shift, but he shook his head.

"Your body is beautiful," he said, "and it gives me much pleasure to look at it. I hope you will permit me to look at it often."

"Mason..." she pleaded.

He helped her to sit and lowered her skirts, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "There's nothing more beautiful than the sight of a woman well-pleasured," he said. "There's a certain wickedness about making love to a woman while fully dressed in the daylight."

"I wouldn't know," she said, jealousy flaring within her.

She couldn't have expected him to remain celibate after they'd parted—not a man of his virility. How many lovers had he taken?

"They meant nothing," he said. She gasped, and he smiled. "You forget, I can tell what you're thinking. I always could. Yes—I succumbed to the offers from the camp followers. I even considered taking a mistress after I'd returned to London until I saw the extent of Father's mismanagement of the estate's funds. But none of them claimed my

heart, which was, and could only ever be—yours.”

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips. “It wouldn’t matter to me if you’d taken a whole string of lovers,” he said. “A beautiful creature such as yourself would have had the pick of admirers.”

She shook her head. “There’s been no one else.”

His eyes narrowed for a moment, then he smiled and patted her hand. “You do me great honor,” he said, “and I’m not ashamed to say that I have no sympathy for the late Mr. Diamond if you harbored feelings for me while you were with him. But Fate decreed a long time ago that we belonged together. And neither my father nor your late husband, God rest their souls, can have just cause to object. I can only hope that Mr. Diamond will forgive me from beyond the grave when he sees how much I shall love his children.”

Lily’s heart skittered in her chest. What a fool she was! She’d almost revealed her deception.

“Was he a kind husband?” he asked.

“I had a happy homelife,” she replied, keeping her voice neutral.

He kissed her again. “I understand,” he said. “I’ll not ask you any more unless you wish. But I have no objection to your talking about him. If he was kind to you, then we should honor him—and Belinda and Amelia should have no reservations about speaking of their father in my presence.”

“They never knew him,” she said. “It—it’s been just the four of us—Mama, the girls and me—for so long.”

“Oh, my poor love,” he whispered. “To have been abandoned, twice. It pains me to think what you went through!”

She rose to her feet, smoothing down the front of her gown, and patted her hair.

“It matters not,” she said. “Didn’t you say we can only go forward—by looking to the future rather than regretting the past?”

“I did, my sensible little flower,” he said. “Then I shall practice what I preach, and we’ll do just that. We shall look to our future. Together.”

He kissed her again, then led her outside. She turned back to face the cottage and smiled.

He was right. There was no point dwelling on what might have been. He was content, believing that her girls were the children of another. Why pain him with the knowledge of the years he had lost?



Chapter Twelve

The main house came into view once more, the stonework glowing pink in the light of the afternoon sun. It had always been a source of strength to Lily—an immovable object within which she could feel safe—until it had been made clear that she was no longer welcome.

“Everything here seems smaller than when I last saw it,” she said. “Except this house.”

“It’s a mausoleum,” he said, “a shrine to the Redstone pride.”

And it was in need of refurbishment. When they’d arrived that morning, Lily had seen the paint peeling off the walls, and the unkempt garden, which had once boasted a neat row of shrubs and a box hedge clipped into the shape of a flock of swans. While the loss of ostentation was not necessarily a bad thing, the overgrown grounds and weeds poking through the gravel gave the estate a forlorn appearance.

“You can restore it,” she said.

“Only with your consent.”

She smiled. “I’m sure your shipping venture will earn you enough to be able to restore it in your own right,” she said, “but if we do marry, my fortune will be yours also, though I would insist on having a say in the style of refurbishment.”

“You can direct me to reshape it in the image of the Trevi Fountain if you wish,” he said. “But the first act I shall undertake will be to settle Wilhelmina somewhere comfortable. The main house holds too many memories for her, and she deserves to live out the rest of her life in peace.”

“You make her sound like an old woman,” Lily said, “yet, if I recall, she’s a year younger than I. A woman in her thirties might be deemed too old for the Marriage Mart, but neither is she knocking on the doors of the crypt.”

"She might as well be in her grave," Mason said. "Sometimes days go by when I don't see her at all."

"Might she join us for our picnic tomorrow?" Lily suggested. "I'm sure the sea air would be beneficial."

"She wouldn't want to come," he said. "She avoids company."

They reached the main doors, which swung open to reveal two liveried footmen. As they crossed the floor toward the staircase, a noise made Lily look up.

Standing at the turn of the stairs, illuminated by the sunlight streaming in from the tall window behind her, was a woman. Tall, slender, and elegantly dressed in a purple silk gown trimmed with black lace, she looked down at Lily, her eyes glittering in the sunlight.

Lily's heart skipped in her chest.

It was Lady Wilhelmina.

She stood just as she had ten years ago—the day she'd stood beside Mason, a sneer on her lips, while he declared his love for her and cast Lily aside.

Lily glanced at the floor across which his footmen had dragged her while she cried and pleaded with him. Then she gave a low cry and stepped back, her body shaking.

A warm hand took her elbow, and he steadied her.

"Have no fear, my love," he said.

Lily blinked, and the woman seemed to shrink in size as if the memory had been playing tricks with her mind. As Mason steered her closer to the staircase, the woman began to descend. With each step, she shrank further until what remained was a frail, thin creature—someone to be pitied rather than feared.

Mason had been right. Lady Wilhelmina was a mere shadow of herself. Out of all of them, *she* had suffered the worse fate—or at least, had been unable to withstand it.

Lily dipped into a curtsy.

"Lady Wilhelmina," she said. "Countess, I trust I'm not imposing by visiting your home."

The woman's eyes widened for a moment.

"Miss de Villiers?" she asked. "Is that you?"

Lily nodded.

"The years have been kind to you," she said. "Though *I* was not. Mason—I don't recall you telling me that we were expecting guests? I thought I heard a noise earlier—it sounded like laughter."

"I beg your pardon, Countess," Lily said. "My mother and daughters

are staying. Perhaps it's them you heard."

"Daughters..." the countess whispered as if to herself. "You have children?"

"Two girls," Lily said. "I can ask them to be quiet."

"No." The countess gave a smile. "I've not heard laughter for years."

"Would you like me to introduce you?" Lily asked.

"Oh, no," the countess shook her head. "I have no wish to impose. But I confess it would be a pleasure to hear them laugh."

She retreated up the stairs, then stopped at the turn and looked back.

"Would you like to have tea with me, Miss de Villiers?" she asked.

"Mason, I'm sure, has plenty to do, but perhaps he can spare you."

"I ought to see to the girls," Lily said, "and I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble."

"Please?"

The plea, almost in a whisper, tore at Lily's heart. The once sought-after debutante had been reduced, through ten years of marriage, to a shell of a woman. Lily had come to Redstone prepared to tolerate her rival. But, on looking at her, she could only feel pity and compassion. Lady Wilhelmina had been raised to be a countess, pushed into her position by ambitious parents, much like any other titled debutante expected to make a fine match.

And yet, in reality, she was nothing more than a cow at auction—handed from owner to owner, her value diminished each time her owner was replaced, until here she was.

Unwanted, childless, and unloved.

The countess offered her hand, and Lily freed herself from Mason's grip and moved toward the staircase.

"I should be delighted to join you."

"I'm glad," the countess replied. "And perhaps, if it's not too forward, you may call me Wilhelmina—if I'm also permitted to call you Lily?"



The countess's hand shook as she poured the tea and handed a cup to Lily. Then she poured herself a cup, picked up a small vial, and shook a few drops into it.

Outside, laughter echoed in the air. Belinda and Amelia must be

playing in the garden.

"I don't often receive visitors," she said, "but I'm glad you're here."

"Thank you," Lily said.

"No, I mean it. You see—I thought you'd died. That's what Charles said shortly after we married. But when Mason said that he saw you in London—I didn't know what to think."

"You knew we'd been evicted?"

The countess bit her lip, and her eyes glistened with tears. "Yes, I did," she said. "Forgive me, but I was glad to see you go. I wanted you gone, you see. I knew how Mason felt about you. But Papa and Mama wanted me to be Lady Redstone. It was my destiny."

"Did you not think to make your own destiny rather than accept that which had been imposed on you?"

"Like *you* did?" Wilhelmina gave a sad smile. "The day I heard you'd gone, I thought my dreams had come true. But, in reality, on that day, you gained your freedom—whereas I lost mine."

"I'm sorry," Lily said. "And please accept my condolences on the loss of your husband."

Wilhelmina closed her eyes, and her body shuddered. "I was a disappointment to him."

"I'm sure that's not true," Lily said.

"No—I failed him. You see, he wanted another heir. Peter had died, and Mason..." She broke off, shaking.

Mason had jilted her. He'd gone in search of another, and when he couldn't find her, had left England altogether. The shame of it shone through Wilhelmina's eyes.

"Charles was determined to beget another heir. He said it was up to him—and me—to renew the Redstone line. But I failed him."

Lily's stomach churned, threatening to expel her tea. So, Wilhelmina had ended up as nothing more than a broodmare for Mason's father.

"You're so fortunate to have children," Wilhelmina said. She crossed the floor to the window and looked out.

"Oh!" she cried. "They're beautiful! Look—they're playing with Mr. Baxter's pointer!"

Lily joined her at the window to see the girls running about the garden with a large brown dog, throwing a stick and laughing each time the dog retrieved it and bounded back to them.

"How I envy you!"

A tear rolled down the countess's cheek, and Lily's heart broke to see it.

“So many times I thought I’d succeeded,” she said, “but each time...” She shook her head. “I wonder if they’d have been like your children.”

“Oh, Wilhelmina, I’m so sorry.”

“Mason will want a child,” Wilhelmina said. “There’s only him, now. He’ll need a son.”

“Does he want a son?” Lily asked.

“They all do, in the end. The blood of their ancestors runs thick in their veins, like a poison, compelling them to continue the family line. Rather primitive— isn’t it?”

The countess returned to her seat. “I’m rather tired, now. Would you excuse me?”

Finding herself dismissed, Lily dipped into a curtsey. Before she left the room, the countess had fallen asleep, her chest rising and falling as she snored gently.

This broken shell of the woman, who relied on opiates to survive, had once been the darling of the ton. Was this what marrying a title led to?

It would be foolish to surrender freedom for such an existence.

Lily couldn’t marry Mason. She was a fool to think she could—and an even bigger fool to return to Redstone.



After leaving the countess, Lily followed the sound of laughter to the garden.

Belinda and Amelia were running across the lawn, shrieking with laughter, while Mason stood at the far end, a ball in hand. Mama sat in a wicker chair, wrapped in a blanket, watching them, a broad smile on her face. Since they’d arrived in the country, Mama’s complexion had improved, the once-gray pallor of her cheeks replaced by a rosy hue.

“Come on, Billie!” Mason cried. “You must show me how it’s done!”

Few people were permitted to call Belinda by her nickname. Had she grown that fond of him already?

Belinda stopped in the center of the lawn and held her arm up, brandishing a thick wooden stick, and Lily recognized the rounders bat she used to play with.

“That’s it!” Mason said. “Now watch the ball.”

With a fluid motion, he swung his arm and flung the ball toward

Belinda. It flew through the air in a wide arc. Belinda swung her arm back, then with a satisfying thwack, she struck the ball, which flew back toward Mason, sailed over his head, and disappeared into the bushes.

Amelia let out a cheer, and Belinda threw the bat to the ground and sprinted round the perimeter of the lawn, while Mason rummaged around the bushes on his hands and knees. By the time he emerged holding the ball and sporting several scratches, Belinda had completed her run, finishing by Mama, where she threw her arms round her grandmother. Then she looked up and saw Lily.

"Mama!" she cried. "Did you see me?"

"Yes, I did!" Lily laughed. "Are you enjoying the game?"

"Yes, it's wonderful!" Amelia cried. "Papa Mason has been telling us how you used to beat him at it. I'd never have thought girls could play games, too."

Papa Mason? No—that wouldn't do.

"Girls can do anything, silly goose," Belinda scoffed.

"Of course," Mason added, winking at Lily, "your Mama had a peculiar talent for hitting the windows when she played. I lost count of the number of visits the glazier had to make."

"Would you like to play, Mama?" Amelia asked.

"Perhaps later," Lily said. "Lord Redstone, might you be so kind as to show me the walled garden? Girls. Could you help grandmama inside? It's getting rather cold."

Mason's smile slipped at her formal address, and he raised his eyebrows in question.

"Mama!" the girls protested in unison.

"Your mother's right," Mason said. "There will be plenty of time to play rounders again tomorrow—at our picnic."

"Oh yes!" Amelia said. "Did you say we're going to meet a duchess?"

"That's right," Mason replied. "Now, run along and take care of your grandmother."

He offered his arm to Lily. "Shall we?"

She took it, and he led her across the lawn toward the walled garden.

Like the rest of the estate, it had been neglected, and the shrubs were in need of pruning. Weeds poked through the gravel path, and the rose bushes showed the tell-tale marks of disease—dark spots spreading across the foliage.

"It seems as if all the occupants of the estate have suffered in your absence," Lily said. "Even the plants."

"We can make them better," he said. "We'll make everything better."

Lily blinked back a tear. "I'm sorry, Mason," she said. "I can't."

"Can't treat the roses?" Mason laughed. "We can replace them."

"You can't simply replace one living thing with another if the environment is too hostile for it to thrive."

"What are you saying?"

"I can't marry you, Mason," she said. "I'm sorry—I thought I could, but it was a dream. Nothing more."

"What's all this?" he demanded. "It's Lady Wilhelmina, isn't it? What did she say?"

"Nothing, I..."

"I bloody knew it!" he cried. "She always looked down on you—but I thought she might have learned her lesson."

"She *has* learned it," Lily said, "and a bitter lesson it was. I've also learned a lesson. Seeing what has befallen her has brought me to my senses."

"How so, may I ask?"

"Your father's need for an heir almost destroyed her," Lily said. "It *has* destroyed her. When will you be overcome by the same need? I'm thirty-two, Mason. Too old to give you a son. If you marry me, this estate will pass to a stranger. I don't want to be the cause of that." She turned her head away to hide the tears which threatened to spill onto her cheeks. "I don't want you to think me a failure."

"You think I care for a son?" he asked. "I confess, I'd like an heir, but what matters most to me is you, my darling Lily. Why would I want anything more when I could have you?"

He took her hand and kissed it. "You must learn to trust me again and take a leap of faith," he said. "I speak the truth when I say that I value you more than the prospect of an heir."

"You do?"

He stopped and turned her to face him. His gaze fixed on her, his eyes dark, searching.

"You must speak the truth also," he said. "Trust runs in both directions."

Her heart skittered in her chest. "What do you mean?"

"I think you know," he said. "When were you going to tell me?"

Dear Lord—he knew.

She swallowed and nodded. "Did Mama tell you?" she asked. "She promised not to."

"You think I'd be angry?" he asked.

"Aren't you?"

"Of course not!" he said. "I'm proud of you. It's a shame you feel the need to keep it a secret—though I understand that many of your clients wouldn't wish to deal with a woman unless they believed her to be guided by a man."

"My-my *clients*?"

"At Waterman Allied, of course! I should have known that you were the hand steering the company. Did Mr. Waterman ever exist?"

A wave of relief washed over her.

"Yes," she said. "He's Mama's cousin. He gave me a position in the company—as a favor to Mama. But it was the opportunity I needed, and he was kind enough to give me more responsibility until when he retired, he handed over the business to me."

"And where is he, so that I may thank him for making such a wise decision?"

"He retired to Rome," she said. "He's half Italian."

"Waterman doesn't sound very Italian."

"His mother was Contessa Luciana Conti—Mama's aunt," Lily said. "I wasn't so proud as to refuse an offer of employment from a relative."

"I'm glad you didn't refuse," he said. "Look at what you did with the opportunity!" He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Oh, Lily, how could you think I'd treat you the way Father treated Wilhelmina! The pride which tore us apart no longer exists. I have learned that bricks and mortar mean nothing to me without the woman I love—and I have no need of children of my own when I can share my heart and my home with yours."

"You promise?" she asked.

"What must I do to convince you?" He placed a light kiss on the corner of her mouth.

"My darling Lily, I will do everything in my power to earn your trust."

He glanced up at the sky. "I fear it looks like rain. That's one thing I loathed about the army—marching in the rain. We should return to the house. I trust our picnic tomorrow won't be spoiled by the weather."

"Did you say something about a duchess?" she asked.

"The Duke of Westbury lives on the neighboring estate," he said.

"Ravenwell Hall?" Lily asked. "I thought he was a marquess—and something of a cad."

In fact, if she recalled, he was worse than a cad—he had a reputation for being the worst rake among the whole of the ton, which, given the stiff opposition he would have faced for that particular title, was a

remarkable feat.

“He was both!” Mason laughed, “but he had the fortune to marry a woman of good sense shortly before he inherited the title from a cousin. I believe you’ll like her. She has, by all accounts, a gift for mathematics, so you’d have plenty to talk about.”

“And the duke?”

“He’s a changed man,” Mason said. “I wouldn’t have believed it until I saw him. Some men are capable of changing for the better.”

If Mason was right—if the worst of men was capable of redemption—then Lily had no right to deny Mason the chance to prove his love.

And, if she were honest, she was curious to meet a like-minded woman. Perhaps she might make herself a friend.



Chapter Thirteen

“You seem very fortunate in your choice of fiancée, Lord Redstone. Doesn’t he, Henry, my love?”

Mason glanced at the elegantly dressed woman sitting on the blanket beside Westbury. The warmth of the summer sun, together with a stomach full from the picnic, gave rise to a gentle lassitude.

He shouldn’t have eaten that last piece of fruitcake. Even glancing at the crumbs on the plate before him made his stomach groan. Mrs. Biggins, who’d always been fond of Lily, had insisted on preparing a spread of biblical proportions, and the twins had done it justice. Even the duchess had tucked in, showing the healthy appetite of a woman with a country upbringing, rather than that of a brittle debutante who thought it fashionable to refuse to eat.

“I am very fortunate, Duchess,” he replied.

“And her children are delightful! It’s good to see girls with an active interest in their education. They seem so familiar. I’m sure I’ve seen them before but can’t place where. Have they visited this part of Sussex before?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Mason said.

“Perhaps they remind me of someone.”

Shrieks of laughter carried across the heathland, obscuring the delicate song of the skylarks. But Mason didn’t mind. He loved the sounds of nature on the heath, the lilting tone of the larks as they ascended higher and higher in the summer air. But the sound of Lily’s laughter, and the children’s, brought life and hope back to his heart—hope that he’d be able to recapture the bliss of having the woman he loved in his life, in his family...

And his bed.

Last night he’d crept into the guest wing to find her waiting for him

in her chamber—naked and pliant, open and ready. He'd found his release as soon as he entered her, his body shuddering with such sweet pleasure, so unlike the base, animalistic rutting he'd used during the past ten years to try and cure himself of the memory of her.

Amelia raced toward him. "Will you play with us, Papa Mason?"

"Have mercy, Millie!" he laughed. "I'm exhausted." He gestured toward Lady de Villiers, who, reclined in a chair, was snoring gently. "You've worn out your poor grandmother. But Westbury here would gladly oblige, wouldn't you, old chap?"

The duke frowned. "I don't know..."

His wife gave him a nudge. "Go on, Henry," she laughed. "Don't be so stiff! You can throw a ball at least, can't you? How many times have you boasted about your sporting prowess when you've been teaching Edward how to bowl?"

"Cricket's a different game to rounders, Jeanette," the duke said irritably.

"The principle's the same," the duchess continued. "You throw a ball, and someone hits it. Just because rounders isn't played at Harrow doesn't make it any less of a game."

The duke let out a sigh and struggled to his feet.

"Anything for a quiet life," he said. Then he took the duchess's hand, and they exchanged a glance—just a quick meeting of the eyes, but it conveyed enough love to melt Mason's heart.

"Ladies!" the duke called out. "Allow me to oblige."

Lily hesitated, but Belinda and Amelia, not intimidated by the duke's rank, ran toward him, whooping with delight.

"Come here, sir," Belinda said. If the duke was offended by her tone of authority, he wasn't showing it.

"It's *Your Grace*, Billie, not sir," Amelia said. "You know that!"

Belinda snorted. "It means the same thing, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't. Don't you remember what grandmama told us?" Amelia demanded. "An earl, like Papa Mason, is *my lord*, and a duke is *Your Grace*."

"Then why don't we call Papa Mason *my lord*?"

"Because he's going to be our Papa, and we like him too much to call him by his title."

"Then perhaps I should be offended at your insistence on calling me *Your Grace*," Westbury said.

Amelia blushed, and he chuckled. "I'm jesting, of course." He held out his hands, and the twins took one each and skipped across the heath

toward Lily, who waited with the bat in her hand.

"They're charming girls," the duchess said. "The likeness is striking."

"They're twins," Mason said, reaching for a spare sandwich.

"I meant the likeness to their mother," she said. "Something about the shape of the eyes. The resemblance to their grandmother is even more striking. Lady de Villiers has the kind of face that's not easily forgotten."

She frowned as she watched the duke throw the ball to Amelia, who swung the bat then threw her head back, laughing uproariously.

"There!" she cried. "I knew it! It's been needling at me all day. Can't you see it?"

"See what?" Mason asked.

"The portrait in the gallery at Redstone Manor," she said. "The one of your late father. Something about the shape of the forehead and the chin. Just then, when Amelia said something, the resemblance to your father was uncanny."

She shook her head. "I see likenesses in everyone," she said. "Ever since Lady Almondbury tried to spread rumors that Henry's the father of Lady Strathdean's youngest child, I've become a little obsessed with family resemblances. Forgive me, I meant no disrespect."

"No disrespect?" a voice laughed. Westbury stood before them, ball in hand. "My dear Jeanette, your frankness is legendary. Fortunately, Redstone here isn't the type to take offense, are you, old chap?"

"I'm hardly a saint," Mason said.

"Neither am I," Westbury laughed, "as my Jeanette frequently points out." He nodded toward Lady de Villiers, who still slept soundly. "It's pretty decent of you to not mind about your mother-in-law's past occupation."

"Her what?"

"Come, Redstone! Surely you know?" Westbury lowered his voice. "La Flamme was a legend in London. Your father doted on her. He was considered to be her property—and she his, of course, for at least four summers."

"Henry!" Jeanette hissed. "You promised you wouldn't say anything."

"He has a right to know."

"Not at the expense of his happiness. The late earl is not alive to defend himself, and Lady de Villiers is a charming woman—she doesn't deserve to be gossiped about."

"I don't gossip," the duke protested.

"What was it you said to me earlier today? *Like father like son, like mother like daughter?*"

"Jeanette..."

"Oh, Lord Redstone, I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't mean anything by it. I, for one, think you've made an excellent choice."

"You've not offended me," Mason said.

No—rather than offend him, the duchess had opened his eyes. As the children ran back toward the picnic blanket, arm in arm, followed by Lily, the resemblance struck him. Hidden in plain sight, why had he not noticed it before?

The clues had been placed before them. Perhaps, blinded by hope, he'd not seen them.

Belinda and Amelia—they were the image of Mason's father.

What was it Lily had told him yesterday? That there had been no other man for her? Why had he not spotted it before?

Mr. Diamond didn't exist.

Lily was not Belinda and Amelia's mother. She was their sister.

And Mason was their brother.



By the time they returned to Redstone Manor, having said their goodbyes to the Westburys, Lily's expression told Mason that she knew something was wrong.

"Lady de Villiers," he addressed Lily's mother. "Would you be so kind as to take Belinda and Amelia inside?"

"Of course."

The girls took each of her hands and led her through the main doors—perhaps for the last time.

Though he tried to keep his voice neutral, he couldn't ignore his horror—or his disgust. He was disgusted with Father. The man had tossed Lady de Villiers and her daughter out of her home, then set her up as his mistress and got her with child. He'd separated Mason from Lily, telling him she was beneath him—yet he'd bedded her mother for his own personal gratification—after he'd married poor Wilhelmina. To think what he'd put Wilhelmina through, forcing her through endless pregnancies to beget another son, yet he had fathered two bastard daughters with Lady de Villiers!

“Mason?”

A light hand touched his arm, and he looked into a pair of soft gray eyes filled with concern.

He flinched and withdrew.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I-I can’t marry you.”

Her eyes widened. “Why not?”

“The girls—Amelia, and Belinda...” he shook his head. “I know who they are,” he said. “I should have realized, but I didn’t see it until today. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to,” she said, “but didn’t know how you’d react. Mama wanted me to tell you—she’d be so relieved that you know, now.”

“It makes a difference,” he said.

She stiffened. “What do you mean—a difference?”

“To us.”

Her expression hardened. “What are you saying?”

“You didn’t think you should have mentioned my...” he gestured in front of him, “...my blood relationship to the children? Or that your mother was a prostitute?”

The color drained from her cheeks.

“Mama did what she had to after your father turned us out,” she said, gritting her teeth. “And if I were in her position, I’d have done the same. I take it you find your...*blood relationship*...to my children an impediment?”

“*Your* children?”

“Who else’s would they be?” she demanded. “And presumably because they’re born out of wedlock, they’re not fit to take the name Redstone, even given their lineage?”

“No, it’s not because of that,” he said.

“Don’t insult my intelligence again!” she cried. “You forget, I know how this story unfolds. The Redstone family pride has come to the fore.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Then let me explain it. You’ve decided to follow your father’s example. Will you set me up as your whore, like your father did to my mother?” She gave a bitter laugh. “Are you to marry Wilhelmina instead?”

He shook his head. “It’s not that I don’t love you, Lily, but I have to think of Wilhelmina. She’s not been well, and...”

She held up her hand. “Spare me,” she said. “Anything you say is only in attempt to ease your conscience over evicting us from your home

again. At least in that respect, I can save you the bother. We can leave immediately.”

“At least wait until the morning,” he said.

“No, we’ll go now.”

“What will you tell the girls?”

“It’s a little late to pretend you care about that,” she said. “But one thing I shall certainly *not* tell them is the identity of their father—a man who never wanted them.”

He moved toward her, offering his hand. “Lily...”

Pain exploded in his face as she delivered a stinging slap.

“No!” she cried. “You don’t get to call me that. It’s *Mrs. Diamond*.”

“A name that doesn’t exist.”

“You’re despicable.”

Before he could respond, she turned her back and disappeared through the door.



Though he was hungry, Mason’s stomach turned as he ladled white soup into his bowl.

Or was it the four empty spaces at the dining table which gave rise to the nausea in his gut?

Father, I hope you rot in Hades for what you’ve done.

That old bastard had separated Mason from the woman he loved when he was alive. And now—once more—he’d torn them apart from beyond the grave.

He picked up his wine glass and drained it, motioning to the footman for a refill.

After he drained it a second time, he held it up again.

“Sir, I don’t think...”

“I don’t pay you to think,” he growled. “Give it here.” He snatched the bottle from the servant’s grasp and poured wine into his glass, spilling it onto his hand.

He wiped his hand, and the action knocked his glass sideways, spilling the remainder of the wine onto his lap.

“Damn!” He flung the bottle across the room, and it smashed against the far wall with an explosion of red liquid and shattered glass.

“Well, *that’s* not going to solve your problems.”

Wilhelmina stood in the doorway, the bottle having narrowly missed her.

What the devil was she doing out of her suite? Since his return to Redstone, she'd not set foot in the main part of the house.

"What do you want, *stepmother*?" he asked.

She folded her arms. "I want to know why you've sent her away."

He snorted. "I'd have thought you'd rejoice. You've never liked her."

"Maybe I didn't ten years ago, but a lot's changed over the years," she said. "She's changed, and I've changed, even if *you're* still the same. But perhaps it was too much to expect a man to conquer the Redstone pride. It runs right through to your bones."

"I'm thinking of her," he said, "and of you."

"No—you're thinking of yourself and the Redstone name."

"Do you know who those children are, Wilhelmina? Lily is their sister—not their mother. They're Father's bastards!"

She flinched at the force of his anger.

"That damned man was determined to keep us apart," he said.

"He's not the one keeping you apart now, is he?"

"Lily and I are virtually brother and sister," he said, "and I couldn't parade father's bastards in front of you—not after what he put you through. I can just imagine what you'd feel every time you looked at them. You must hate them!"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I envy them—and I envy *her*. I envy their youthful exuberance and the fact that they have a mother willing to let them decide their own fate. I envy their laughter—the joy I heard in their voices. Oh, Mason! To think that we could have seen such joy come to Redstone! Is your pride worth more than that?"

"What about *your* pride, Wilhelmina?"

"I lost that years ago," she said. "You must think me a simpleton if you believe that I was unaware of your father's affairs. For all I know, the country is littered with his bastards—and good luck to them. Why should they suffer because Charles couldn't keep his breeches buttoned? I would welcome each and every one into Redstone Manor. A child shouldn't be blamed for their parent's actions."

"Is that what you really feel?"

"Yes," she said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. "What does it matter if those girls are your father's children? You're not related to Lily herself, are you? In which case, there's no impediment to your marrying her other than the Redstone pride."

"I promised myself I'd take care of you—to make up for what Father

did to you.”

“Then do it,” she said. “Do it by marrying the woman you love and by bringing joy and light to Redstone. They don’t need you, Mason. You need *them*.”

“What if she’ll not forgive me?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Then it’s your loss, isn’t it?”

Yes. It was his loss.

Again.



Chapter Fourteen

“Mrs. Diamond, there’s a gentleman to see you. He’s waiting downstairs.”

Lily’s heart gave a jolt, and she looked up from her paperwork. “Who is it, Mr. Settle?”

“Viscount de Blanchard.”

She wrinkled her nose at the thought of that sweaty lecher. “What does *he* want?”

“Insurance, I suspect,” Mr. Settle said. “I heard on the exchange that all of the syndicates have rejected his application.”

“And we’re his last choice? How flattering. Can’t you send him on his way?”

“He insisted on speaking to the man in charge.”

“Very well, let him up, so he can be rejected by the *woman* in charge.”

She rose to her feet. Better to face de Blanchard standing. He’d been known to pounce on a woman, arguing that by sitting in his presence she indicated her availability for seduction.

She moved toward the window and looked out. Thick, dark clouds hung in the sky, obscuring the sunlight. Rain fell onto the pavement below. She folded her arms and shivered. The weather matched her mood—damp, dark, and depressing. The crowds, which usually thronged round the docks, vibrating with excitement and the anticipation of the arrival of the ships, seemed to droop, like daisies whose petals had been ripped off by the force of the rain and who’d surrendered to the elements, their stems weakened by the onslaught. Not even the recent arrival of a schooner, owned by a privateer rumored to have engaged in a skirmish in the North Sea, was enough to muster enthusiasm as the people scuttled along the pavement in their

desperation to seek shelter.

Across the street, Mrs. Moffett's pie shop teemed with activity, the windows fogged with steam. Doubtless, she'd make a fine trade today. The poor weather always drove patrons to her premises, seeking warmth and a full belly. Lily's stomach growled. Perhaps she'd pay Mrs. Moffett a visit and take a basketful of pies home for supper. Belinda and Amelia were in need of something to cheer them up.

Curse him!

And curse herself for falling for it again—for believing the promises he'd made. In the end, his pride had won out. It might have lain dormant while he'd gallivanted over Europe shooting the French. But it had never left him.

And this time, he'd not just broken one heart—he'd broken three.

If she had anything to be thankful for, it was that he'd rejected the girls before they'd grown to love him as much as she did.

"Mrs. Diamond, what a delectable pleasure!" a voice said.

Viscount de Blanchard stood in the doorway, Mr. Settle beside him. He glanced dismissively at the clerk.

"What are you still doing here? Shouldn't you be filing papers or something?"

Mr. Settle raised his eyebrows.

"It's alright, Mr. Settle," Lily said. "Perhaps you could oblige me by paying a visit to Mrs. Moffett? I'd like four beef pies, and take one for yourself."

"Very good, madam." Mr. Settle bowed and retreated. De Blanchard closed the door behind him and approached the desk. He gestured to Lily's chair.

"Sit," he said.

Arrogant boor!

She folded her arms and shook her head.

"I'm a busy woman, Lord de Blanchard. It's best if you leave."

"But Mr. Settle said you were available..."

"I've changed my mind."

"And what of Mr. Waterman? I asked to see the man in charge, not his doxy. Pretty enough, you may be."

"There is no man in charge," Lily said. "I make the decisions here."

"A woman?" he laughed. "How preposterous. What does a woman know about insuring ships? She should stick to spreading her legs."

"I know a damn sight more than you do," she said. "I know enough to determine that your operation is too great a risk even for the most

foolhardy syndicate. At Waterman Allied, we only consider the best quality clients, and I'm afraid you fall far short of our requirements, both in terms of your business and your person."

He approached her desk and placed his hands on it, thick fleshy fingers curling round the edge. His fingers glittered with an overabundance of elaborate rings. She wrinkled her nose at the dirt under his fingernails. How many times had those fleshy paws taken to appropriating what didn't belong to them—whether it was a coin or an innocent woman's virtue? De Blanchard's reputation for the ruin of women surpassed even his reputation for the ruin of any enterprise he became involved in.

"You're turning down my business?" he sneered.

"And your person," she said. "Your business is unsafe, and your company is repugnant. Please leave."

His eyes widened in surprise, then they glittered with a sly expression.

"You're running a sham, aren't you?" he asked. "Mr. Waterman doesn't exist, does he?"

"He does exist," Lily said, "but this is *my* company now."

His eyes glittered with greed. "So you're a wealthy woman," he said. "A woman of means, on her own in the world, needs a protector—or a husband. I'm not fastidious. I can do both."

"Don't be a fool."

He let out a laugh, his double-chin wobbling. "Perhaps if you're unable to offer me a policy, you can offer something else. At least I won't have wasted my time."

Lust shone in his eyes, and her stomach heaved. "I think not," she said. She moved toward the door and opened it.

"Please leave," she said. "I suggest you self-insure."

"What the bloody hell does that mean?"

"It means you should accept the consequences of your own mismanagement rather than expect others to do it for you."

"You arrogant little whore!" he snarled. "I should teach you a lesson."

"I think not," she said. "Mr. Settle!" she cried. "Would you escort this person out and make sure he never returns?"

Her voice echoed in the corridor, then silence fell, save for the clatter of the rain on the window.

A hand caught her wrist.

"You forget, you sent your lackey on an errand," de Blanchard said,

leering at her. "Methinks you're in need of a protector—and I'd be happy to oblige. I like a woman with spirit—so much more fun to break."

He pursed his lips for a kiss and thrust his face close. His breath, a mixture of rotten fish and stale sweat, rippled through the air, and her stomach churned.

"Sweet Lord!" she cried.

"That's it, little one," he whispered.

"Get off me, you rutting pig!" she cried.

"Rutting, eh?" he laughed. "That's an idea..."

She swung her leg up and rammed her knee into his groin.

He let out an airless cry and doubled up.

"Heavens, woman! What the bloody hell are you doing?"

"Teaching you a lesson," she said. Gripping his elbow, she steered him out of her office, then she pinched his ear, and he howled in pain. If he was going to behave like a nasty schoolboy, then she'd evict him like one.

He struggled in her grip, and she pinched him tighter.

"I wouldn't if I were you," she said.

Pushing him in front of her, she led him to the top of the stairs and marched him down. As she reached the main door, they opened to reveal Mr. Settle standing with a basket.

"Your pies, Mrs. Diamond," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Settle."

He eyed de Blanchard. "What are you doing?"

"Disposing of the rubbish," she said. "Would you step aside, please?"

He complied, and she shoved de Blanchard out of the door, where he stumbled and fell onto the pavement. He struggled to his feet, shaking with rage, his hands balled into fat fists.

"You'll regret that—bitch!" he cried. "I'm well connected. If you reject me, I'll tell the whole of London that you're compromised—that you spread your legs for me over your desk!"

"Say what you like," she said. "I care not."

"I'll ruin your reputation."

"There are worse fates to befall a woman," she said. "An association with you, for one."

"I'll ruin your business," he said. "I'll tell the world that you're running a sham."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a deep voice said.

De Blanchard looked round. Standing in the middle of the street—in

the pouring rain—was a tall, broad-shouldered figure. Eyes flashing with rage, his body exuded raw male power.

“Mason...” she whispered.

“Lord Redstone!” de Blanchard cried. “Have you come seeking insurance?”

“No,” Mason said, his gaze fixed on Lily. “I’m here for another purpose.”

He continued to stand in the rain, which was beginning to soak through his jacket, dark stains spreading across the material. A rumble of thunder echoed overhead. De Blanchard whimpered, but the man staring at Lily, his eyes dark with need, made no move, as if he were unaware that the rest of the world existed—unaware that anything existed.

Except her.

“This company’s a sham!” de Blanchard cried. “There is no Mr. Waterman—there’s only *her*.”

“I know,” Mason replied, his unblinking gaze fixed on Lily.

“But that’s shocking! She should be publicly disgraced.”

“No,” Mason said quietly. “She should be applauded. It’s bloody wonderful, and I’m so proud of her.”

De Blanchard snorted. “What—that harlot?”

Mason’s head snapped round, and Lily caught a blur of movement as he lunged toward de Blanchard. With a dull crack, his fist met de Blanchard’s chin, and the other man crumpled to the ground.

“How dare you insult her!” he roared.

De Blanchard rolled over and tried to stand, but Mason approached him again.

“Stay down, you dog!”

“Who’s she to you?” de Blanchard sneered.

“She’s the woman I love,” Mason said, “the woman I have always loved, though I was weak and let my stupid pride get in the way. She’s the woman who has fought and worked hard for everything she has today. She’s the most loving, caring, selfless person I know. She’s bright, intelligent, and strong.”

He stepped closer to Lily, his body shaking with emotion while the rain ran down his body in rivulets, dripping off his hair.

“And, if she’ll forgive this complete arse who stands before her, she’s the future Lady Redstone.”

“You’ll be the laughingstock of society,” de Blanchard spluttered.

“Let them laugh,” Mason said. “Let them all laugh. Pride—society—it

means nothing to me without her. Now, I suggest you go before I kick you so hard in the balls that you'll be singing castrato for the rest of your life." He curled his lip in distaste. "Perhaps I'll do it anyway, then you'll be less of a menace to women."

De Blanchard opened his mouth to reply. Mason's eyes darkened, and his nostrils flared, and the viscount closed his mouth and fled.

Mason's gaze settled on Lily once more—regret and fear in his expression. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "I rather think I hurt him."

He smiled. "That's my girl."

"I'm not..."

"Please," he whispered. "Please, forgive me."

He held his hands out to her as if in a plea.

"Did you mean what you said—to de Blanchard?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I'd say it to the whole world if you gave me another chance. In fact..." He lowered himself to the ground, kneeled before her, and held out his hand.

"Mason!"

"Please, Lily."

She took his hand. His skin was cold, and he curled his fingers round hers like a drowning man clinging to a lifeboat.

"I love you, Lily," he said. "I have always loved you."

"And the girls?"

"It matters not whose daughters they are," he said. "I will love them as if they are mine."

"What do you mean, *as if* they are yours?"

"I understand how hard it must have been for your mother," he said, "to have so many children to care for—and I admire her for not using them as a weapon against Father."

She drew in a sharp breath as understanding hit her.

"You think I'm their sister?" she cried. "That they're *Mama's* and not mine?"

"Aren't they? The likeness is unmistakable..." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I should have noticed it, the resemblance to Father. I heard how besotted he was with La Flamme—it was only natural that if he patronized her for so long, there was a danger of his siring..."

"Stop there!" she cried.

"Forgive me. I have no wish to betray her secret," he said. "Your mother is a good soul who was forced to survive in circumstances which were not her doing."

"That she was," Lily said, "but my mother has no other children apart from me."

"Then—Belinda and Amelia..."

"They're *my* children," Lily said. She shook her head. "I never took you for a simpleton, Mason."

"Then their father..."

He looked up at her, the raindrops splashing off his face. Then a shimmer of hope shone in his eyes, followed by recognition—then joy, and finally sorrow.

He let out a cry and reached out to her.

"Oh, Lily!" he cried. "What have I done!" He shook his head. "Dear God—they're *mine*, aren't they?" He drew in a breath, and his body shuddered. Then he shuffled toward her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and buried his head in her chest, his body shaking.

She stroked his head, running her hands through his wet locks.

"You didn't tell me," he said, his voice muffled. "Oh, Lily—you didn't tell me!"

The pain in his voice ripped through her heart, and she held him close.

"Then you didn't reject me because the girls were yours?"

"Sweet heaven, no!" he cried. "I never rejected you—I thought to let you go because I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"That the shame would be too much," he said. "That you were their sister, and I, their brother. I couldn't bear the thought of the scandal—the thought that it might come between us. Then I realized that I didn't care. That if scandal came to our door, we could fight it together and, if need be, we could go somewhere else and find peace and happiness—perhaps by dancing in the Trevi fountain together."

"What about Redstone Manor?" she asked. "The home you love so much? Your family line?"

"You think any of that matters one jot compared to you?" He shook his head. "And now I know that our love gave rise to two beautiful children, I never want to be parted from you—or them—again. To think what I have missed these past ten years, what I threw away, and nearly lost a second time! Oh Lily, why didn't you trust me enough to tell me—to send me word? Had I known you were pregnant, I would have returned, and to hell with father and his demands."

"Forgive me, Mason," she said. "You'd abandoned me. I, too, had my pride."

He smiled sadly at her.

"We can't change the past," she said. "We can only look to the future."

"Then share my future," he pleaded. "Will you take me as I am? A foolish man who has much to learn—who was too weak and proud to follow his heart, but who finally understands what it means to truly love another?"

Voices murmured around them, and Lily glanced up. A small crowd had formed, a handful of men and women, too curious about the scene unfolding on the street to mind the rain.

"Mason, get up," she said, "you have an audience."

He glanced over his shoulder, then smiled. "Good," he said. "I have witnesses."

"Witnesses to what?"

"My declaration of love." He opened his arms wide and shouted into the air.

"Let it be known that I, Mason Henry Redstone, am in love with this woman, Lily Lucia de Villiers—and I have loved her for over ten years!"

A ripple of whispers threaded through the crowd.

"And furthermore, I declare that I am a simpleton to have let her slip through my fingers when I first fell in love, and I shall do everything in my power to show that I have conquered my pride and to prove myself worthy of her."

"Oh, how romantic!" a woman's voice cried.

Lily felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. How could he make such an exhibition of himself?

"Shall I prostrate myself fully at your feet?" he asked. "You are my goddess, and I would worship you."

"Mason..."

"I'll lie in a ditch if need be," he said, "if that will show you that I care nothing for my pride. Why—I'll even parade naked round the docks."

A small gasp came from behind. Mr. Settle stood by the door, his eyes wide behind his round glasses.

"Mason, please get up," she said. "What will people think?"

"I care not what they think, Lily. I want the whole world to know how much of an arse I am—and how much I love you. Will you take me as I am, Lily? A weak soul who loves you, who wants to make up for the years he has lost?"

Love and hope shone from his eyes. And for the first time since they

were reunited, she glimpsed his soul in their blue depths. She took his hand, and he rose to his feet and caressed her hair. Then he drew her to him, offering his lips for a kiss.

Gladly she gave it, and she pressed her lips against his, relishing the gentle warmth of his soft sigh against her skin.

“Will you make me the happiest man on earth, my Lily?” he whispered.

“Yes, Mason,” she said. “Yes, I will.”

The crowd burst into a round of applause.

“We have witnesses,” he said, “so we must both honor our promise to each other.”

“I will honor you if you honor me,” Lily said.

“Trust me, Lily,” he said. “Let me show that I’m worthy of your trust.”

She nodded, and his expression broke into a wide grin for a moment, reminding her of the young man who’d won her heart. Her Mason—the boy she’d pledged to love until the end of her days.

And she would—they both would, together.



Epilogue

Rome, November 1816

Lily stretched languorously, relishing the warmth of the sun on her skin. Voices swirled in the air outside, the musical tone of a foreign language accompanied by the rush of water. She turned her head toward the window. The sun was already reaching its peak, shining on the roof of the building opposite, which stood out, a bright fiery orange, against the azure sky.

She rolled onto her side—the sheets cool against her naked flesh—yawned, and closed her eyes. The bed shifted, and a large hand caressed her shoulder, moving along her arm, then across her chest in a sweeping motion, fingertips bringing her skin to life. The hand circled her body, spiraling inward until it settled on her breast, where her nipple hardened.

A small fizz of need burst in her body, and she shifted position, pressing her breast against his palm, chasing the pleasure.

Then a hot mouth came down on her breast, and she gave a low groan, shifting her legs together to ease the ache in her center.

“Good morning, Lady Redstone,” a deep voice rumbled.

She opened her eyes and looked into a blue more intense than the sky.

“My wife is hungry,” he whispered. “Shall I serve her?”

“What time is it?”

“Nearly noon.”

“Mason!” she cried. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“What—when you looked so peaceful?” He shook his head. “I may have fought at Waterloo, but few men are brave enough to wake a sleeping woman when she looks so comfortable, no matter what time of

day it is. I've been told it's akin to poking a viper's nest with your hand. Besides..." he grinned, a hint of bedevilment in his eyes, "...you must be exhausted after last night's activities. I'm surprised the ceiling in the room below us didn't cave in."

She flushed at the memory of their lovemaking—how they'd ripped each other's clothes off even before they'd closed the bedchamber door, how he'd taught her how to ride him. Her body gave a little pulse at the thrill as she recalled how he'd woken her up in the middle of the night and mounted her with an urgency that had magnified the pleasure until she thought she'd die of ecstasy.

He nuzzled her neck, which tightened as he placed a kiss on her skin, sensitized with need. Then he dipped his hand between her thighs and sighed as his fingers moved slickly against her.

"Mason!" she admonished.

"That's it, my Lily," he murmured, nibbling her earlobe. "Scream my name so that all of Rome may hear it."

"I care not what all of Rome thinks, but I do care about the girls and Mama."

"I deposited your mother and the girls safely by the Trevi fountain earlier this morning," he said. "I'm instructed to escort them back to the hotel mid-afternoon, then I am free until dinner time before my next errand."

Lily laughed softly. "Has Mama still got you running after her?"

"Yes," he said. "I promised to cater to her every whim until Christmas, as penance. It was the only way I could gain her consent to marry you."

Lily smiled to herself at the memory of Mason standing before Mama, soaked to the skin, pleading forgiveness, like a wayward child. Mama had intended to entertain herself by making him suffer, but Belinda and Amelia had spoiled her plans. When the girls saw he'd come home with Lily, the day he'd kneeled before her in the rain outside her offices, they had shrieked with delight and thrown themselves at him, pleading with him never to leave.

"Christmas is a long time away," Lily said.

"And I can't wait," he replied. "Christmas, with my family."

He placed a kiss on her breast, flicking his tongue over the nipple, then followed a trail of soft, open-mouthed kisses across her body until he reached her belly, which was just beginning to swell.

"To think," he whispered, his breath tickling her skin. "Next Christmas, there will be an addition. I'm looking forward to meeting

him.”

“It might be a girl,” Lily said. “It might be *two* girls—Doctor McIver says that twins run in families.”

He gave a mock groan. “Then I’ll be even more outnumbered,” he said. “More females to order me about!”

“Are you not used to being ordered about, having served in the militia?” she teased.

“Your mama is considerably more imposing than Wellington.”

“I trust she’s not taking advantage of you with unreasonable demands.”

“No,” he replied. “One demand, in particular, I intend to fulfill with every fiber of my soul.”

“And what’s that?”

He took her hand and kissed it, then lay beside her, his skin warm against hers.

“She told me that I had to make you happy—as happy as you deserve.”

He caressed her leg, his fingers hot against her skin, and she sighed at the little pulse of pleasure and parted her thighs. Then he slipped inside her, filling her world with pleasure.

“Now,” he said. “Where were we?”

About the Author

Emily Royal grew up in Sussex, England, and has devoured romantic novels for as long as she can remember. A mathematician at heart, Emily has worked in financial services for over twenty years. She indulged in her love of writing after she moved to Scotland, where she lives with her husband, teenage daughters and menagerie of rescue pets including Twinkle, an attention-seeking boa constrictor.

She has a passion for both reading and writing romance with a weakness for Regency rakes, Highland heroes, and Medieval knights. Persuasion is one of her all-time favorite novels which she reads several times each year and she is fortunate enough to live within sight of a Medieval palace.

When not writing, Emily enjoys playing the piano, hiking, and painting landscapes, particularly the Highlands. One of her ambitions is to paint, as well as climb, every mountain in Scotland.

Follow Emily Royal:

[Website](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Newsletter signup](#)

[Goodreads](#)